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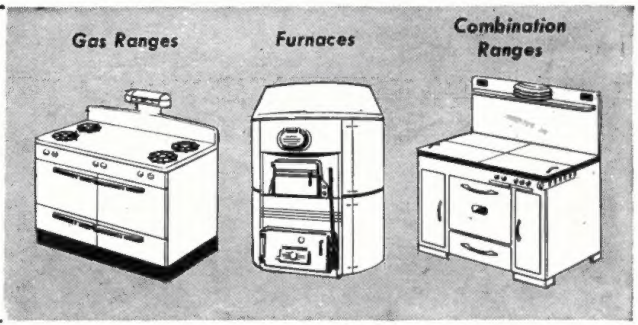

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THE STRAWBOSS

THE raw gray prairie of Oklahoma looked like a green and pleasant valley to the young Marine. He twisted his thin frame feverishly on the hard seat of the day coach and pressed his face eagerly against the grimy car window. Oil derricks—black skeletons against a dirty sky—moved slowly past the train.

Texas has blue-bonnets and smiling cowboys wearing white sombreros and the indigo jewel of the Gulf. Texans brag about their beautiful women and the graceful lines of the shattered Alamo. Anyone can love Texas—but it takes a native Oklahoman to love Oklahoma.

The young Marine was an Oklahoman. But the battle stars that studded the strips of campaign ribbons showed that he hadn't been home for a long, long time. A cattle buyer who was wiping the cinders off his red, perspiring neck smiled at the youngster in the crumpled green uniform and said, "Marines, huh?"

All the taut nerves in the kid's body suddenly tightened and he wanted to say, "Sure, Marine! What do you think I'm dressed for, a masquerade?" Instead, he managed to smile back at the well-meaning cattleman, and say:

"You know, I haven't seen a cow since December 8, 1941!"

"Yeah?" The cattleman got chummy and sat down beside him. "Guess you'll be glad to get back to your own kind of folks."

"Sure." The Marine suddenly wondered what "his own kind of folks" were.

"Where you from?"

"A ranch—a little one. 'Bout twenty miles from here, just outside of Sapulpa."

"Well, we're coming into your home spread now. Looks pretty good, don't it?"

And it did look good. The hills were sweet and green, not yet scorched by the thundering summer sun. Pale fields of new wheat, just a foot high, stretched along the railway tracks. At a grade crossing, a tow-headed kid, stout and freckled, waved at the engineer in the cab.

Suddenly, the Marine from Oklahoma was scared. It was the kid that did it, he thought. He looked so different from the skinny little Filipinos.

The Marine stole a look sideways at the brawny cattle buyer in the seat beside him.

"He isn't my kind anymore," he thought. "My kind are the guys I left behind, sitting on that pincushion of an island, swatting mosquitoes. Sammy Silverman and Hank Adams."

"Guess you're lookin' forward to some good home cooking," the cattleman said. And the Marine remembered a great plate of golden fried chicken, and hominy, and greens, and steaming corn on the cob.

"After the war," he grinned, "I'm going to have every doggone man in my outfit come to Oklahoma to sample mom's chicken. I already promised them."

The red-faced man smiled appreciatively. "Son, that'll be some clambake!"

"Sure will!" the Marine agreed. He chuckled, thinking how skinny Hank Adams would dive into mom's mashed potatoes. Then the smile left his lips. Hank wouldn't be welcome in his home—couldn't be welcomed. Hank was a Yankee. Worse, his great grandfather was an Adams of Boston and had led a Union regiment. He could almost hear the icy silence that would greet Hank's slow New England twang.

Sammy then. Big Sammy Silverman was a man, even in Oklahoma where they grew them plenty tall. Cheerful Sammy, who was smiling even on that night he pulled the young replacement from Oklahoma out of a shell hole. He owed a lot to Sammy.

But Sammy had never been outside of Brooklyn before he went to Okinawa. His people spoke a different language and they went to church on a different day. How could he say to him, "My folks would love to have you"? when he knew that his neighbors would laugh and mimic him behind his back. No, Sammy was out.

The Marine's confused thoughts were broken as the train swirled into the station. He could see his father and his kid brother waiting underneath the elm with the buckboard and a fast, new horse.

The cattle buyer pounded him on the back, saying clumsily again, "Guess you're glad to be back with your own kind?"

"Yeah, sure," said the Marine. But he knew he must win another battle—one on his own front porch!

—THE EDITOR

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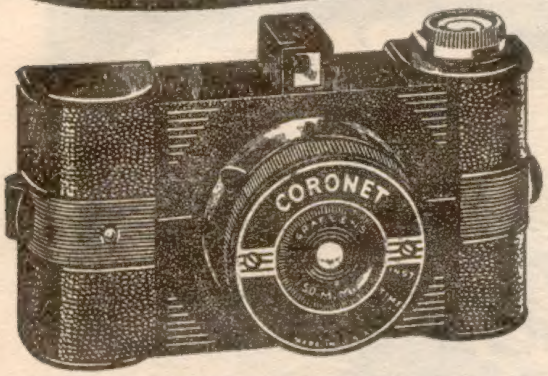

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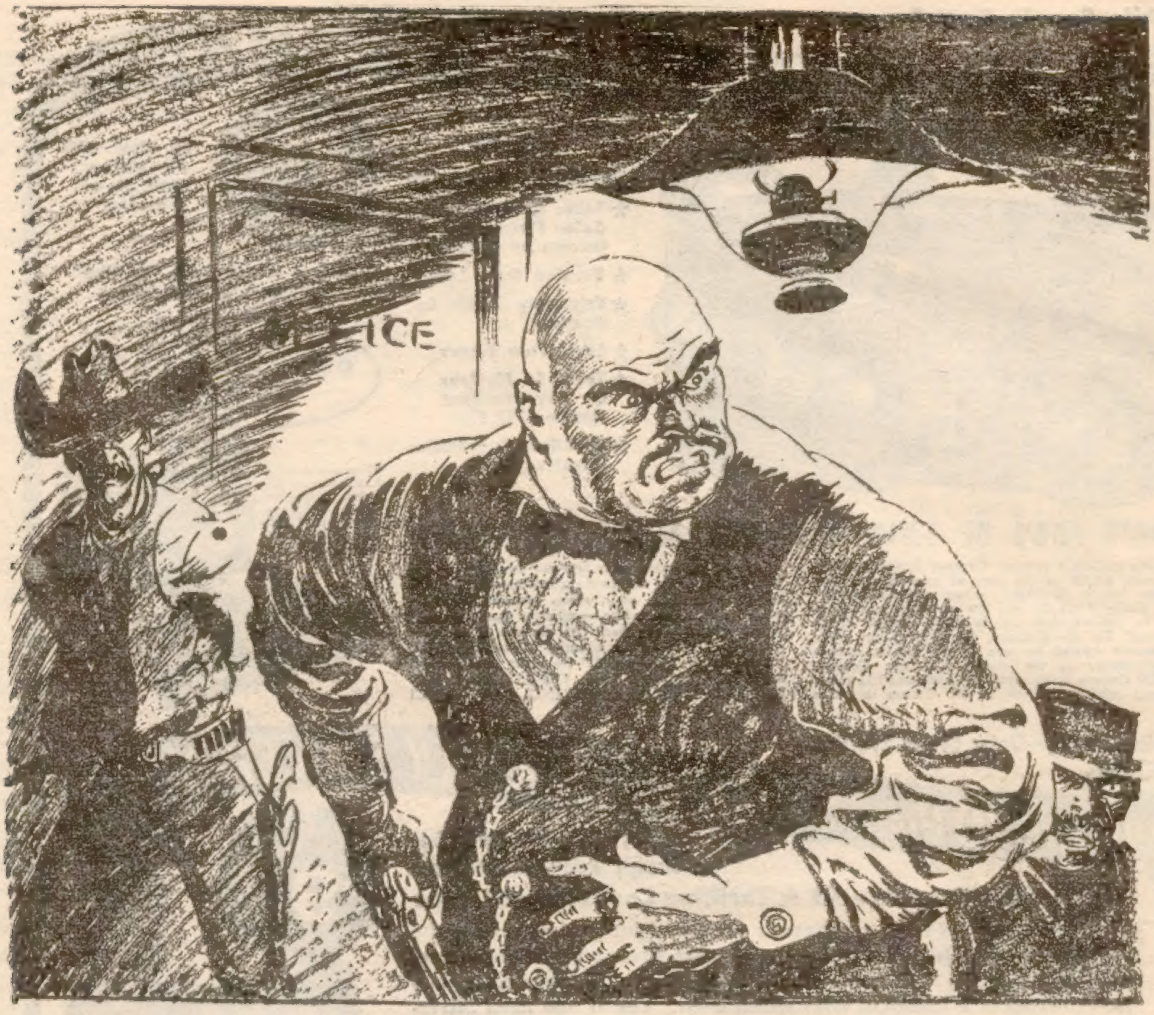

★ ★ Gun-Cure for

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble Casts A Shadow

IT WAS late afternoon when the stage topped Packsaddle divide, and started down the long grade to Lava City. Inside the stage Phil Masters, looking down into the deepening canyon, was filled with mingled emotions. For the first time in six year he'd see Rosanne Britton. No, Rosanne Redfield now. Even after six years he still thought of her as Rosanne Britton, and after six years the old wound was still an open, festering sore. Now, when he saw her, he'd know whether he could have given her more happiness than Verd Redfield had. Either way there would be no satisfaction in it. Again he called himself a fool for coming; a mental condemnation he'd given himself every waking hour since he'd left Arizona a week before.

The gray-bearded oldster who sat beside Masters was leaning over his shoulder and staring down at the silver streak that was Packsaddle Creek. He now said, "By grab, that sure is a long ways down."

Masters made no reply. The oldster had

Six years should be ample time to heal any wound—especially if the victim is a medico himself. . . . Yet Doc Masters was never closer to boothill than when he headed for roaring Lava City with but one desperate remedy left—a kill-or-cure hot lead tonic!

Masters had sensed Sprule's move and went for his gun.

Lava City

Stirring Novelette of a Powder-Keg Town

been trying to carry on a conversation with him since they'd left the Columbia that morning. Masters merely grunted some monosyllabic answers, but that didn't discourage the bearded one.

"Yes, sir," the old man went on, settling back down in the seat, "that's the damnedest canyon I ever saw, but the boys did a good job when they cut this road out. Even grade all the way up. Reckon the railroad will follow the road, which won't leave no way for horses to come up from the desert unless they learn to fly."

The small man in the opposite seat scowled, and threw his cigarette stub out of the window. Masters had sized him up as a hardcase. He had a hard pair of green eyes,

and a scar at the left end of his mouth which gave it a vicious, downward twist. There was a bone-handled gun strapped on his hip, and Phil Masters, having spent most of his last six years with men who rode the dark trails, recognized this scar-lipped man as a back-shooting renegade, and wondered why he was headed for Lava City.

The oldster reared up in his seat when he saw the cigarette stub go out through the window. "Why, you danged fool," he spluttered, "are you trying to set the woods on fire? Dry as it is this time of year—"

"Keep your face shut, you old wind bag!" The small man said it out of the right side of his mouth, his green eyes narrowing.

The oldster disregarded the last remark and went on speaking to Masters. "Like I was saying about the railroad, it'll do a lot for this country all right, but it'll sure put a pot of hell on to boil in Lava City. Charlie Britton has kept things in line since he took over the store, but you pour a bunch of tough construction hands in here, and even Charlie won't be able to keep law and order."

"Charlie Britton," Masters said slowly, "is dead."

"Charlie dead?" the oldster shouted. "That couldn't be. Charlie Britton is the kind of a man who lives forever."

"He's dead," Masters repeated.

THE OLDSTER swore long and fervently. He stared in silence at the steep bank outside. Then he looked at Masters, and said softly, "Charlie Britton was a man to ride the river with. I've worked for him ever since he came to Lava City, and bought the store. I've been gone for a spell, and I hadn't heard. How did it happen, mister?"

"Lead poisoning," Masters answered darkly. "He was working on his books in his office one night. Some skunk got him through the window."

Again the oldster swore. "Charlie Britton was plumb handy with a hogleg. They'd have to get him that way. I don't know a damned thing about it, but I'll bet my bottom dollar Dance Sprule killed him, and if he did, I'll—"

"Shut up!" The little man was bending forward, right hand gripping his gun butt.

"I'll not shut up," the oldster roared. "I dunno who you are, feller, but you sure look like one of Sprule's hired hands. Mebbe you did that killing yourself."

Masters saw the killer gleam in the little man's green eyes. He was watching for the first indication that the old man was going for the gun on his hip.

"Go on," the little man goaded, "fill your hand. Sure I'm coming in to work for Dance Sprule. If you don't like Sprule take a shot at me."

The oldster roared a curse, and fumbled for his gun. That was all the little man needed. His gun came up fast, but not fast enough. A black-handled Colt appeared in Masters' fist. The little man's hand halted, his gun half lifted, as suddenly as if some unseen cord had restrained it.

Masters' left hand swept out, gripped the old man's partially raised gun barrel, and held it. "Put it up, old timer," he said softly. "This ugly-looking monkey isn't half as tough as he thought he was. Just reach over and hand me that iron."

The oldster grinned as he jerked the gun from the little man's hand, and gave it to Masters. "He sure is a proddy devil. Friend, I'm thanking you. I dunno why I pack this here iron. I never was fast enough with it to beat a mess of molasses running loose in January."

"No use getting sucked into a ruckus with a professional like this tough," Masters said as he slipped the gunman's Colt into his waistband, and holstered his own. "Now that you're trimmed down to your proper size, little man, you might stop throwing your cigarette stubs out of the window."

The gunman sat as if frozen, the half-smoked cigarette dangling from the right side of his mouth. He finally spoke. "You're going to regret taking part in this game. I never forget mister! Never!"

"That so?" Masters asked easily. "Well, sometimes a good forgetter is mighty useful." He glanced at the old man beside him, and smiled a little. The oldster seemed to have utterly forgotten that a moment before he'd been looking directly into the sullen face of death.

"LIKE I was saying," the old man said cheerfully, "Charlie Britton was plumb handy with his iron. Packed it just like you do. Along with owning the store, the hotel, and the stable, he was town marshal. I've seen him go into Dance Sprule's

place when there was a big crowd in there, and a ruckus starting, and bring his man out without even getting a hair out of place. Allus kept his hair combed real purty, Charlie did. He must o' been forty-five or more, but by grab, he could handle any man twenty years younger'n him."

"This Dance Sprule," Master asked. "Where does he fit in?"

"He came to Lava City about six months ago," the oldster said. "Bought the Palace Saloon, and worked it over until it's a swell place. All the little saloons are closed now. If you want a drink nowdays, or a game, or a waltz with some of them good-looking fillies he's brought in, you trade with Dance Sprule."

"Why would he want to kill Charlie?"

"Ain't no secret about the way he hated Charlie," the old man said quickly. "No secret at all. Ask anybody around Lava City. Charlie made him keep his place clean. Look at what's gonna happen here soon as they start laying steel. There'll be a thousand men coming into Lava City every night with money burning holes in their pockets. Sprule can open up the little places. He'll have the whole show roped and tied: whisky, gambling, and women. He'll make a killing, Sprule will."

Masters nodded. He thought of the letter Sharon Britton had written to him. Sharon was Rosanne's kid sister, a long-legged, yellow-haired girl with pigtails down her back. That was the way Masters remembered her. She'd written that trouble was rolling in fast, more trouble than the killing of her father. She hadn't mentioned Dance Sprule, but she had said she hoped Masters would come. The town had no medico within twenty miles and she thought he might like to start a practice here. Besides, half of Charlie Britton's property had been willed to Masters and half to her. It was a strange thing, Masters thought, that the will had given Rosanne nothing, and yet not so strange when he stopped to think about it. Charlie had hated Verd Redfield, Rosanne's husband.

"There's another funny thing in Lava City," the oldster went on. "Charlie's son-in-law, Verd Redfield, lives here, but Charlie wouldn't speak to Verd on the street. Verd runs the bank, but I don't reckon Charlie ever deposited a nickel there in the five years he's been in business in Lava City. He's got a big safe in his store, and he allus kept his dinero there. If he shipped any out, it went by stage to a Portland bank." The old man shook his head gloomily. "I dunno about Verd."

The oldster didn't say that he suspected Verd Redfield of having a hand in Charlie Britton's death, but he might as well have. Masters was still thinking about that when the stage rumbled down the last steep slope, and rolled to a dust-rising stop in front of the hotel. The little man still sat as if paralyzed, only his eyes showing life, and in them hate was a terrible and driving force. Now he said to Masters out of the corner of his mouth, "I'll get you, my friend. Mebbe not tonight, but if you hang around Lava City, I'll get you. That's a promise, and Lip Toney don't never break a promise." Then his green eyes turned to the old man. "I'll get you, too, old goat. Dance Sprule will hear how you've been running off at the mouth, and he won't like it."

Masters waited on the boardwalk for his valise, and watched Lip Toney strut away and disappear through the batwings of the big Palace Saloon. Masters grinned at the old man, and held out his hand. "I'm Phil Masters. Reckon we'll meet again."

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil Makes An Offer

PHIL MASTERS washed the dust of the long day's travel from him, shaved, and had supper in the hotel dining room. It was a new hotel. Two years old, the clerk told him, and it was a good one. Too good for a town the size of Lava City, but Charlie Britton must have seen what was ahead, and he'd built accordingly. It seemed to Phil Masters, as he had his supper, that the presence of Charlie Britton was there in the dining room. He could picture Charlie's big-boned figure standing at the desk, speaking in his familiar, hearty way to people as they came in. He was here, too, in the courteous service, the low prices, the good food. Those were things Charlie Britton believed in.

He finished his meal and went upstairs to his room. He started to unpack his valise. Among the things he took from it was his black medical bag. He placed it on

the bureau top, and then sat on his bed and stared at it while he tamped tobacco into his pipe. That bag represented years of work and thousands of dollars that had come from Charlie Britton's pocket. Never, as long as he lived, would Phil Masters forget the morning after his graduation from medical college. He was in his room packing. He was taking the train that night for Arizona where he'd nail up his shingle, but before the train pulled out he was to marry Rosanne Britton. It was to be a quiet wedding. Just Charlie, little Sharon, and Verd Redfield. Redfield was a law student and had been his best friend. Redfield's father was the biggest banker in Lava City.

Then Charlie Britton had walked in and closed the door. He'd put his back against it, and stared at Masters. "Take it easy, boy," he'd said. "No use going off half-cocked. I wish to hell I didn't have to tell you this. You've been all a son could have been to me, and I'm proud. Damned proud. But the thing I've wanted most I'll never have."

Masters remembered his knees going weak, of sitting down suddenly. Charlie had told him then, looking down at the floor. "This morning Rosanne married Verd Redfield. They've already gone from the town."

He didn't remember if he had made any reply. He just stared at the floor. Britton broke the silence. "You go on to Arizona, boy. That's a new country for you to grow up in. You'll be the best damned pill thrower in the territory. Sharon and me are going to Lava City. I don't know what business I'll get into, but I'll get into something. And Phil, there's one thing you can count on. I'll be watching Redfield. If for one minute he don't treat Rosanne right, I'll kill him."

He would have done exactly that, Masters told himself. Phil Masters had gone to Arizona, but he'd thrown more lead than he had pills. He dodged back and forth across the border, he'd made a dozen fortunes and lost them, he'd tried to drown himself in whiskey to forget Rosanne. None of it had been any good. None of it had held any satisfaction, nor had he forgotten Rosanne. Now here he was, and in a few minutes he'd be looking at Rosanne Britton —no, Rosanne Redfield.

OUTSIDE dusk was flowing down from the mountains, and across the sage flats of the desert. Masters had a look at his gun. If Rocky had given it to him straight, he'd be paying Dance Sprule a visit before long. And, too, there was Lip Toney.

It seemed strange to Phil Masters as he went down the stairs that he owned half of this hotel. Half of the big store across the street. Half of the stable at the end of the block. Half of a large bank account.

When he reached the boardwalk he looked carefully along the street. Six years of riding with border-jumpers had taught him things that had saved his life more than once. He could be thankful now for those things he had learned. If he were reading the sign right, he'd be using all his knowledge before many hours were gone.

On down the street was the Palace: big, loud, gay. Already riders were drifting in from the desert and the mountains, hitching their mounts in front and moving on into the saloon. The urge was in Masters to go into the Palace, find Dance Sprule, and give him the only kind of medicine, men of his ilk understood.

Above the town on the hill was the big house Charlie had bought two years ago from Verd Redfield's father. Masters could see it from where he stood. At the time of its purchase Sharon had described it completely. Masters had planned to go there. He'd see Rosanne again. Perhaps Verd Redfield would be there. It would be an unpleasant scene, one that Phil Masters would have given a great deal to avoid, but it was not his way to duck an issue. There would be no ducking this one. Too he'd have to see Sharon, and talk with her about the property they had jointly inherited.

For a time Masters stood there on the boardwalk thinking and making his decision, a tall, big-boned man whose brooding face mirrored the bitterness in him. This had been Charlie Britton's town, and Dance Sprule had challenged that. If the oldster, John Rock had been right, it was one of his paid killers who had murdered Charlie. Again Masters thought of Rocky's suspicions concerning Verd Redfield. It was that thought which turned Masters into the Palace.

The Palace was a huge saloon and dance hall, its three pairs of swinging doors in-

laid with colored glass. Inside was a long bar along one side of the big room. There were numerous card and faro tables. Along the right wall were stairs leading to the floor above.

There was a large crowd in the Palace. Most of them were working punchers, but he also spotted men of Lip Toney's class, hard-eyed, gun-hung killers, any of whom might have been the one who had blasted life from Charlie Britton. Masters had a beer, and standing at the bar, let his gaze range over the room. Verd Redfield was not there. It didn't prove anything, one way or the other, but it was nevertheless, a satisfaction to Masters. The thought that Redfield might have had anything to do with the killing of his father-in-law nauseated Masters.

Nowhere in the crowd did Masters see a man who might be Dance Sprule. He had decided to go on to the Britton house, and come back later when a big man stepped out of a back room, little Lip Toney at his side. He paused momentarily, eyes sweeping the room as if looking for someone. In that moment the gunman Toney saw Masters, and said something to the big man. His eyes rested on Masters, and then he came on toward him.

THERE was something familiar about the big man. He was burly and thick-shouldered with a great, bald head atop a short neck. He wore expensive clothes: black broadcloth trousers, a purple silk shirt with Mexican coins instead of buttons, chained together by silver links, and shiny, black boots. A pair of pearl-handled six-shooters rode on his hips. Contrasting with his bald head were black, beetle brows. Under them sharp, cunning eyes raked Masters as he came up.

Then Masters remembered. Two years ago he'd seen this man in El Paso. Only briefly, but once seen, he was not the kind of man who could ever be forgotten. One more thing Masters remembered, and it was the important thing. The bettle-browed man had not tarried in El Paso. A few hours later a U.S. Marshal had ridden in looking for him.

This was a new angle, and Masters decided to work it. Just as the beetle-browed man opened his mouth to say something, Masters said coolly, "Well, if it isn't a small world. So you beat Dave Quinn across the border. I often wondered. You weren't Dance Sprule then, were you?"

The words Dance Sprule was going to say died in his throat. Even Lip Toney stood beside the big man as if paralyzed. Masters had no way of knowing how it would go. It might be gun action, and quick. Then the moment passed, and Sprule leaned against the bar, some of the sureness gone out of him.

Again he started to speak but again Masters beat him to it. "I hear you're doing well here, Dance. Since Charlie Britton died."

"Who the hell are you?" Sprule demanded. "A lawman?"

Masters chuckled as if it were a good joke. "Not me. I've been a lot of things, friend, but I never packed a star. No, I'm a doctor. I heard about the railroad coming to Lava City, and I thought it might be a good place to tarry."

"I tell you he was on the stage," Lip Toney snarled. "An old jigger with a beard was filling him full about—"

"Yeah, I heard you," Sprule said. He stood stroking his blocky chin, his eyes on Masters as if considering this carefully. "So you're a sawbones, are you? You pack that iron like you knew how to use it; which same is mighty queer for a sawbones."

Masters shrugged. "Oh, I dunno. Down along the border I was several things, but that iron was always handy." Masters paused, and then played his trump with casual indifference. "You know, Dance, I always figured you'd be a good man to work for. And I'm broke."

"You think I'd be a good man to work for?" Quick pride came into Sprule's eyes. "Well, I could use a few more good men here. If you work for me you won't be broke long. Things are boiling down fast."

Toney was plucking at Sprule's coat sleeve. "Lemme fix him, Dance. I got a personal—"

"Shut up!" Sprule said, still eyeing Masters. "This jigger looks like he's smart. Now a smart man sometimes can forget what he knows. If he ain't smart, he remembers, and he don't live long. This is my town now, friend. I pay good. There's no limit to what can be done."

"He'll write to a—" Toney began.

Sprule pinned his gaze on the little gun-

man. "You talk too much, Lip. Now drift."

Toney cast a venomous glance at Masters. Then, cursing under his breath, he moved away.

"HERE'S the way it is," Sprule said persuasively. "If I back you up, you can go over as a sawbones. We sure need one, but he's got to take my orders. That's the way it's got to be from here on. You said something about Charlie Britton. Did you know him?"

"Yes," Masters admitted. "I knew him before I went south. It got a little hot for me, but that's another story. I knew Charlie pretty well. I can see why he's dead."

Sprule grinned. "Now you can use what you've got between your ears. You play along with me, and you're set. There's one thing that'll tell me how you stand. There's a gent here who was mighty fond of Britton. His name's Odum. Alec Odum. I want him beefed, sooner the better. You do the job, and I'll know how you stand. The price is one thousand dollars."

"Where'll I find him?" Masters asked.

Sprule ran a hand over his bald head. "That ain't easy. He never comes in here." Sprule thought for a time. "What's your name?"

"Masters. Phil Masters."

Sprule shook his head. "Never heard of it, but I didn't stay in El Paso long."

Masters smiled faintly. "Neither did I."

Sprule grinned back. "It gets hot down there sometimes. I'll tell you, Masters. I've got men who could slip Odum a slug, but I aim to play it smart. If I put one of my men on the job, there'd be hell to pay. A deputy sheriff was in here after Britton got beefed, but he didn't find anything. Another time, and he might. Suppose you call on Odum tomorrow, and get acquainted. Give him some yarn about being interested in Britton. You said you knew him. You can take it on from there."

"Just one more thing," Masters said carelessly. "This John Rock who was on the stage said a gent named Verd Redfield was in on this. That right?"

There was no reading big Dance Sprule's face then. He said coldly, "It don't pay to ask questions, Masters. You carry out my orders, and we'll get along fine."

Masters shrugged indifferently. "O.K., Dance. And by the way, keep that banty rooster you had with you off my back. He's got some ideas about drilling me."

"Lip won't bother you," Sprule said. "Now drift."

Masters nodded, and walked out of the saloon. He couldn't tell, as he walked up the hill to the big Britton house whether Dance Sprule had merely wanted to get him out of the Palace where he could be bushwhacked, or whether the big man had talked straight. But no bullet came out of the darkness. It was Masters' guess, then, that Dance Sprule would wait to see whether he carried out the order to get Alec Odum. Meanwhile Phil Masters would be watched, and the first suspicious act would bring that bullet. He might be watched now, and Masters smiled in the darkness when he wondered what Sprule would think when he learned of the call Masters was making.

CHAPTER THREE

"Keep Your Fist In Their Face!"

THE Britton house was big, centering a huge yard that was surrounded by a white picket fence. A row of spear-pointed poplars lined the front of the yard. Now, as Masters came up the steep trail, he was remembering that this had been the Redfield house. Sharon had written about Charlie buying it, and in the next letter she'd said Verd's father had died. It was then Verd had taken over the bank, and that, Masters had gathered from Sharon's letters, along with the Palace Saloon, were the only important businesses in Lava City Charlie Britton had not controlled.

Masters had one bad moment as he crossed the porch to the door. He didn't want to see Rosanne. He felt, in that moment, he never wanted to see her again. When the door opened, it wasn't Rosanne who stood there, but a lovely, golden-haired girl, her shapely figure silhouetted against the light. She was taller and prettier than Rosanne. This couldn't be Sharon, the pigtailed, leggy kid who had always been under foot when he used to call on Rosanne, the kid he couldn't get out of the Britton parlor when he wanted an evening alone with Rosanne.

Then she cried out, "It's Phil," and she

was throwing her arms around him and kissing him, and crying. "It's Phil—they said you wouldn't come." That moment washed away six years of bitterness. This was a homecoming a man would never forget.

When he held her away from him, and turned her face to the light, he saw it was the same pert, freckled-dusted nose, the same bright blue eyes, but a fuller-lipped, redder mouth. Six years had brought to her the full-bosomed, curved figure of maturity.

She had stopped crying now. She said huskily, "I'm sorry I'm such a fool, Phil, but I so wanted you to come. I'm not crying for Dad. I never shed a tear for him. He wouldn't have wanted it. He always said he never had any use for a woman who blubbered around like a wall-eyed calf. I cried because I was so glad to see you." She threw her arms around him, and kissed him again.

Later Sharon brought him into the shaft of light from the doorway, and looked at him. "You're a little heavier," she said, "but not much. Same sharp nose and square chin. Dad always said you have the chin of a man who knew how to go forward, but not back."

From inside the house a woman called, "Who is it, Sharon?"

Sharon slipped her arm through Masters'. "There's a big conference going on. You got here just in time to throw in your two-bits worth. Remember half of Dad's town property is yours. The other half's mine, and I don't know what to do with it." She drew close to him, and said again, "I'm so glad you're back, Phil."

Sharon looked up at Masters, and he could see a lot of Charlie Britton in her. It was almost as if Charlie Britton were telling him not to lead with his chin. "Stick your fist into their face, and keep it there till they holler." That's what Charlie used to tell him when he came home after a licking. By the time he was fifteen he could lick any boy in town.

Sharon led him into the big front room, walking proudly at his side, her arm still through his. There was Rosanne, plumper than Masters remembered her, a sullen droop to a mouth that had been sweet and

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expressive, and more lines in her face than a woman under thirty should have. These six years had not been happy years, but the knowledge brought no satisfaction to Phil Masters.

Verd Redfield stood by the bookcase, his gaze dropping floorward when he saw who it was. Redfield had gone a little paunchy with the years, and his thin, high-boned face mirrored no contentment. Rather, it seemed to Masters, that there was stamped upon Redfield's countenance the full bitterness of frustration. Again Masters thought of the suspicion the oldster, John Rock, had voiced about Redfield, but now, after the quick glance Masters laid upon the man, he couldn't believe Redfield could be guilty of murder. Treachery, yes, but not cold-blooded murder.

A tall, stoop-shouldered man sat at the far end of the room. He rose now, questioning eyes upon Masters. In the corner was the bearded, oldster, John Rock, who let out a squall when he saw who it was.

"By grab, it's the hombre who kept me from getting plugged," Rocky roared.

"Dr. Philip Masters," Sharon said proudly, "meet Alec Odum. He's the hotel manager, and was Dad's best friend. Alec, this is the Phil you've heard us talk about."

"Pleased to meet you, Masters," Odum said with quiet dignity as he shook Masters' hand.

There was nothing pretentious about Alec Odum, but in that moment when he clasped hands with the hotel manager, Masters saw why Dance Sprule would want him killed. Odum would not back away from trouble.

Masters winked at Rocky, and slowly turned his gaze upon Rosanne. She said, as from a great distance, "It's nice to see you again, Phil."

Masters considered it a debatable point, but he let it go. He said, "You look well, Rosanne." For just a moment Masters' eyes locked with Redfield's. Redfield asked, courteously enough, "How are you, Phil?"

Here was the man Masters should hate, the man he should kill. This was the moment he'd thought about for six years. He'd told himself he'd make Redfield fight, and he'd kill him. Yet now, strangely enough, there was no hate in Masters. Not for Verd Redfield. If he were reading faces right, he'd say these six years had brought little happiness to either. Suddenly it seemed as if a great weight had been rolled away from him. He looked again at Rosanne, and felt no stirring in him for her. The old wound was healed. He said, "Howdy, Verd." It was easy as that.

THE long room was exactly the kind of room Charlie Britton would have had. Again, as in the hotel dining room, Masters could feel the unseen presence of this man. There was a huge stone fireplace behind Rocky's chair, a divan with a Navaho blanket upon it, an oak table, and an assortment of guns and knives upon the wall. Some of these, too, Masters recognized.

Suddenly Masters was aware of the silence, and that Odum was looking at him. Sharon was still at his side, her arm through his. Now she drew him toward the divan, and sat down beside him. Of all the startling things Phil Masters had discovered since he'd knocked on the door of this house, here was the most startling. Sharon Britton had grown up, and she'd done a very good job of it. He'd thought, vaguely, that she wouldn't be the pig-tailed kid he remembered, but somehow, knowing that, he'd still pictured her that way. Through the years she'd written to him friendly letters, charming letters, sometimes loving letters. He'd considered them merely a kid's way of expressing herself. Now, feeling her body close to his, her hand still upon his arm, he wondered if he dared hope again, dared dream the dreams that had been ashes since the day Rosanne had married Verd Redfield.

Odum cleared his throat. "I presume you know something about what has happened, Masters?"

Masters nodded.

"Then," Odum went on, "there is only one thing I need say about the businesses Charlie owned. As I understand it the hotel, store, and stable have gone to you and Sharon equally."

"That's right," Sharon said, "and there'll be no argument about how they are to be run. Phil owns the controlling half."

"Now wait," Odum said, smiling tolerantly as if a girl's fancy should not be al-

friendly letters, charming letters, sometimes you can stand some advice."

"That's right," Redfield said curtly.

Odum flushed angrily as he pinned his

gaze on Redfield. The dislike he held for the banker was obvious. For a moment Masters thought Odum was going to ask Redfield to get out. Slowly he regained control of his temper, and turned his gaze back to Masters.

"We're listening," Masters said.

"This is what we had planned," Odum went on. "Rocky here is to run the store. He's familiar with the business, and I know Charlie had full confidence in him. Hack Mulligan has been running the stables, and we'll let it go that way. If there is no objection, I'll continue in the hotel."

Masters nodded. "Sharon knows you three. If she says yes, then it's O.K. with me."

Sharon smiled. "I say yes, Phil. We're lucky to have these men on our side."

Masters looked at her sharply. "Our side?"

"That's right," Odum cut in. "Now here is where the shoe pinches. I have no doubt about Dance Sprule's part in Charlie's death, but so far there has been no proof. A deputy came in from the county seat, and found nothing at all. He's gone, and we have no town marshal since Charlie died. That's the way it stands. No law in Lava City except sixgun law, and that's all on Dance Sprule's side."

"Perhaps we could show him it isn't." Masters suggested.

Odum smiled bleakly. "That wouldn't be easy. Now Sprule may not bother the businesses we just mentioned. I think Charlie was murdered because he had gained control of the real jackpot."

THERE was a moment of silence. Masters asked, "Which is?" He saw that Odum was watching Redfield covertly.

"The right-of-way down Packsaddle Canyon," Odum answered, "and the land here in town upon which the railroad buildings will be erected. Plenty of money is involved. I don't know how Sprule would go at it, but there are ways of tying things up in court. Dance Sprule would travel to hell and back just on the off chance of grabbing this thing."

"There is one way Sprule could go at it," Sharon said, looking directly at Redfield. "Some men would sell their souls for a dollar, and Dance Sprule has the dollar."

Redfield's face slowly tightened. He said grimly, "You always had a sharp tongue, Sharon. Why don't you say what you mean?"

"I will," Sharon answered. "Phil's got to know some things. This is as good a time as any to tell him. Dad hated Verd. This is the first time Verd has set foot in this house since Dad bought it. He was not invited tonight. Why is he here, Rosanne?"

Before Rosanne could answer, Redfield said stolidly, "I'm here because my wife needs my business advice."

"Your business advice," Odum said sourly, "might be more appropriate around a poker table in the Palace."

"One-third," Redfield said, "of the land that will be sold to the railroad was willed to Rosanne. If any decision is made tonight. Rosanne will have her say, and it's no good for you to try to push us out, Odum."

"Odum asked quietly, "What do you propose to do with this property?"

Redfield chewed his lip, not answering for a moment. Rosanne said, "Go ahead, Verd. Tell them."

"You're smart, Odum." Redfield said sullenly. "I don't know how you're working it, but you must be getting your hooks in somewhere. You said yourself there was no law in Lava City except sixgun law," Redfield growled, "and Dance Sprule holds the upper hand when it comes to that. He's offered to buy the right-of-way. We haven't got a chance of fighting him and winning, so I think the smart thing to do is to sell to him."

"But we do have a chance," Sharon said hotly, "now that Phil's here."

"Sure," Redfield sneered. "Turn the pill-thrower loose. It'll take more than pills to stop Dance Sprule. Either we take his offer, or we're dead pigeons."

"What do you think, Phil?" Sharon asked.

"Sell to Sprule," Masters answered promptly, "if he pays the right price."

There was stunned silence then, broken by Verd Redfield's mocking voice. "So the pill-peddler isn't the hell-on-high-wheels he's supposed to be."

"Why do you think Verd came here tonight, Sharon?" Masters asked.

"To spy on us," Sharon said. "I think

he's sold out to Sprule, body and soul. Even Dad, hating Verd, loaned him money to keep his bank going. You didn't know that, Rosanne, but it's true. Dad did it for you."

"No!" Rosanne cried.

"It's true," Odum said. "Now that Charlie's dead, there is no more money forthcoming. One way to pay off a gambling debt to Sprule is to double-cross your wife's family."

"I don't need to listen to this," Redfield said hotly. "I'm going home."

"Wait, Verd." Rosanne gripped Redfield's arm. "I'm sorry it is this way, Sharon. We should make a decision. Tomorrow may be too late."

"Yeah," Rocky blurted. "If you don't agree to sell to Sprule, you may get both barrels."

"What do you mean, Rocky?" Sharon asked.

"Don't ever think Sprule's gonna sit tight," Rocky answered. "He's the kind of a huckleberry who'll do anything to whipsaw you into line, like burning the store or the hotel."

"How do we stand when it comes to lead-swapping," Masters asked Odum.

"We don't stand," Odum said gloomily. "Sprule's got half a dozen lead throwers. What we've got is right in this room plus Hack Mulligan, the stableman." He glared at Redfield. "Minus the banker."

Phil Masters was beginning to see it now. There was one thing to do, and only one. "Keep your fist in their face, and keep it there till they holler." That was it. Dance Sprule thought Masters would be trying to work out a way to kill Alec Odum and earn the thousand dollars Sprule had promised.

"There's one way, Verd," Masters said thoughtfully, "if you keep the wolves off my back. We'll go talk to Sprule."

"No," Sharon cried. "You wouldn't have a chance. There's too many of them, Phil. They'd cut you down. All the money in the world isn't worth that."

"I think I know men like Sprule," Masters said. "All I need is Verd's help."

"Phil, you've just come back," Sharon pleaded.

"How about it, Verd?" Masters challenged.

"You don't know Sprule," Redfield muttered. "I tell you he's only half man. The rest of him is snake. He's just plain ornery."

"It can be done," Masters said quietly, "if we've got the guts to do the job. If we haven't, we don't deserve anything but the two-bit price Sprule would pay us. I say to make Sprule pay the price we want."

"What would that be?" Sharon asked.

"One hundred thousand dollars," Masters said.

Redfield laughed shortly. "He's not that big a fool."

"Dance Sprule is not a fool," Masters said, "but he knows when the big cards are held against him. Trouble is it takes guts to play the big cards."

"All right," Redfield agreed then. "I reckon your life is as valuable to you as mine is to me."

"Phil—Phil," Sharon cried, "You've just come back. Don't go, please."

Masters grinned crookedly. "I'll be back!" Then he turned from her, and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sand In A Man's Craw

MASTERS had almost reached the front door when Redfield called, "Wait a minute, Phil." Masters stopped as Redfield came up to him. There was a strange expression on the banker's thin face, the sort of expression that might have been on a man's face who was gritting his teeth before jumping off a high bridge into an icy stream. Masters didn't understand it. Not until Redfield had pushed past him, and stepped through the door. Then, from the darkness, a gun boomed loudly. Verd Redfield fell face down upon the porch.

Phil reacted without thought. Six years of this sort of thing along the border had given him more than his share of trouble savvy. Now, even as the killer's gun roared again, and a slug slapped into the door casing, Masters had plucked gun, thrown himself away from the open doorway and was squeezing trigger. Five times his hammer came back, and fell. He could hear the rasping breathing of a man hard hit.

Odum called from the house, "Did you get him, Masters?"

"I think so," Masters said. "Stay inside." He dropped off the end of the porch,

circled through the darkness until he came to the fallen man. He started to pick the killer up and carry him into the house, but even as he slipped an arm under the man's body the breathing stopped. "Come out, one of you men," Masters called.

It was Rocky who slid through the doorway in the manner of a man who still thinks hot lead may come slicing out of a night at him.

"Don't reckon anybody else is around," Masters said. "Take a look at this hombre."

Rocky thumbed a match to life and held it close to the man's face. Masters saw a tiny head attached to a long neck, the face covered by a peach-fuzz stubble, the features big and irregular.

Rocky swore. "By hell, it's Pinhead. He was Sprule's top gun hand. Came in with Sprule. Nothing but a trigger-happy, slow-brained gun dog. He'd do anything Sprule told him to."

"I'll go in and take a look at Redfield," Masters said, and turned toward the house.

"He ain't hurt much," Rocky said sourly. "He just took a dive so you'd get the next slug."

But Phil Masters knew better. He found Redfield lying on the divan with a bloody left shoulder. Sharon was heating water while Rosanne stood by crying and being entirely useless.

"I'll get some whiskey," Odum said, and went away.

Masters cut away Redfield's shirt, and saw that the bullet hole was more bloody and painful than dangerous. He cleaned and dressed it, gave Redfield a jolt of whiskey, and asked Sharon to get one of Charlie Britton's shirts. Then he said, "You knew somebody was out there with a gun, didn't you, Verd?"

Redfield grinned mirthlessly. "I wasn't sure. I knew Sprule has had someone watching the house. I figured if it was Pinhead, and he had been listening outside, he'd start shooting. He's trigger happy."

"Then you had sold out to Sprule?" Masters demanded ruthlessly.

"No," Redfield snapped. He sat up. "Look, Phil. I know I don't amount to a damn. Charlie Britton told me that enough times. I know it was a hell of a trick when I married Rosanne."

"O.K.," Masters said a little more kindly. "We'll skip that. It's water over the dam. Besides, there's never any knowing what a woman's heart will make her do. This is six years later."

Rosanne had stopped crying now. She said in a low tone, "There's one more thing you haven't told, Verd."

"I own a bank," Redfield said, and held his head high. "My father had never had trouble until Charlie came here. Then everything that Charlie did turned out fine. Everything that Dad did was wrong. Finally Dad had to sell this house to keep the bank going. He died after that, and I've done the best I could with Charlie bucking me all the way." He looked sharply at Masters then. "I know you think Charlie Britton was the finest man that ever walked, but I'm telling you he was something less. He was hard and tough and unforgiving. Like a damned fool, I tried to pick up what I'd lost by playing poker with Sprule, and instead I went behind. I didn't sell out to Sprule. Not yet. Maybe I would have. I'd do mighty near anything to save my bank."

NOBODY said anything for a time. Even Alec Odum, sharing Charlie Britton's dislike of Redfield, held his silence. Rosanne was sitting beside Redfield, an arm around him. She said defiantly, "If Dad had never come here, Verd and I would have been very happy."

Masters was seeing things in a different light. For all of Charlie Britton's fine qualities, he was never one to forgive. He had come here to Lava City to see that Redfield treated Rosanne fairly, and by doing that very thing he had wrecked his daughter's happiness.

Redfield got to his feet. "I'm all right, Phil. We set out to do a job. Let's finish it."

"Wait," Masters said. "I expected the rest of Sprule's gunslicks to be up here when they heard the shooting. Might be—"

"No," Odum said. "There's been so much shooting around here since Charlie died that they take it for granted."

Again Masters was silent, thinking back over the things that had happened since he had arrived in Lava City, and trying to gauge Dance Sprule's reaction. Finally he said, "I take it you were dickering some with Sprule, Verd."

Redfield's eyes dropped. He muttered, "Yeah. That's right, but I didn't tell him anything."

"Did he know I was coming?"

"Yeah," Redfield admitted. "I didn't tell him about the will. Nobody knows how Charlie left his property but us here in this room. I said I'd married your girl, that Charlie had raised you, and that I figured I'd have trouble when you got here."

"And Sprule said he'd see that I was taken care of if you'd play ball with him?"

"That's right."

"Only you wanted to see what I did before you sold out?" Masters demanded.

"That's right," Redfield repeated.

Masters smiled bleakly, and told them about his talk with Sprule. He ended with, "That's the big card I was talking about. Sprule knows that I had seen him in El Paso when he was just one jump ahead of the law."

Redfield's pale lips twisted into a grin. "I made you out a plenty tough hombre, Phil, and I'm not so sure but what you are."

"Then if you think so," Masters said, "We'll go play our string out. Let's go, Verd."

CHAPTER FIVE

A New Trail Ahead

OUTSIDE Masters paused long enough at Pinhead's body to pick up the man's gun, reload it, and slip it into his waistband. Then as he went on with Redfield, he said, "Nobody will back Sprule but his hired gun dogs, will they?"

"No," Redfield answered quickly. "The punchers who come in don't like Sprule a little bit. Too many of them have got shot cussing out one of Sprule's crooked dealers."

"Where will Sprule be this time of night?"

"In a game," Redfield answered.

"Then this is the way we'll play it," Masters said coldly. "You look like you've just seen something that made you sick. That'll be me shooting Odum. Go up to Sprule and whisper that Odum won't bother him now, and that you're trying to stay out of my way. I'll wait three minutes. Then I'll come in. By that time you're at the bar. I'll go up to Sprule's table, and tell him I want to see him private. From there on it'll go fast. From the bar you can see that none of his toughs put a slug into my back."

"All right," Redfield agreed. "That's the way we'll play it."

Outside the saloon Redfield paused. He said huskily, "Phil, we used to be good friends. As long as I live I'll never know exactly what happened when Rosanne and I got married. I'd known her the three years we'd been together in school, but I never knew until that last morning that I loved her. I'm sorry—"

"We'll forget that," Masters said. "When a man steps through a door and takes a slug that would have got me, I say he's got enough guts to side me in any kind of a tight. Good luck."

They clasped hands, eyes locking for one short interval; then Verd Redfield stepped through the batwings. Masters waited the three minutes. He eased his gun in leather, and shouldered through the batwings. The Palace was full. For one short moment Masters stood just inside the swinging doors, eyes raking the crowd. Masters saw Sprule at a back table, and immediately threaded his way toward him.

Sprule must have seen Masters coming, but he gave no sign. Lip Toney moved into a back room. Masters saw that, and knew what it meant. He noted, too, the loose-jawed, bean pole of a man who detached himself from the bar, and with obvious carelessness, began watching a game a few feet from the door that led into the back room where Lip Toney had gone. No man, except one like Phil Masters to whom it was an old pattern, would have recognized this for what it was.

Masters did not break his stride until he was at Sprule's table. He leaned over the man's shoulder, and said, "This is the pay off. Odum won't be bothering you anymore."

The beetle brows lifted as Sprule laid down his cards, and motioned for a man to take his hand. "Come into the back room, Masters."

Sprule was almost to the door of the back room when Masters said softly, "Hold it, Sprule."

Sprule wheeled to face Masters, sudden anger on his wide face. "What the hell's the matter with you now?"

The bean pole gunslick was directly ahead of Masters, and was watching the scene covertly.

Masters' face was bone-hard, his eyes suddenly sharp and wicked. He said, "One thing you didn't get straight, Sprule. Charlie Britton was like a father to me. I came to Lava City to get the man who plugged him."

MASTERS' tone was so low his words barely reached Sprule. No one else in the big saloon but Redfield knew what was taking place. The bean pole was watching, but he was too far away to hear. Sprule's beetle brows lowered. In that split-second his hand drove for gun butt. Masters had sensed this move and he too hit leather.

The two shots came so close together that Sprule's gun roar could have been an echo of Masters'. Sprule hit the floor with a loud thud. Then the Palace broke into volcanic action. Men ducked for cover. They hid behind the bar or overturned tables, or smashed glass from the windows and dived through. They wanted no part of this. But Sprule's hired killers came at him.

The bean pole had plucked gun, and had it half-lifted when a bullet from Verd Redfield's gun cut him down. From then on for what seemed to Phil Masters like eternity-long seconds the Palace was a nightmare of red hell. He stood with his back to the wall, not wasting a shot, his gun bucking in the steady rhythm of a man skilled in the craft. Lip Toney had come out of the back room with the first shot. Expecting that, Masters laced a bullet into his heart before the little, scar-lipped gunman could squeeze trigger.

Phil Masters saw in that bullet-shredded, smoke-burning instant, that there were too many of them. His gun was empty, and he'd jerked Pinhead's Colt from his waistband. He was hit, more times than he knew. Men were going down before him. Other guns were thundering from the opposite end of the big saloon, and some of Sprule's gun dogs were falling from lead that Masters had not fired. Still there were too many of them.

Then it was over. There were great clouds of powdersmoke drifting upwards into the lights, the acrid smell of it in Phil Masters' nostrils. There was death all around him, and instead of the thunder of guns there were groans and agonized cries of men whose bodies have been broken by bullets.

He stood slumped against the wall. Then for the first time he saw the stooped figure of Alec Odum, the whiskery face of old John Rock, the wide, stubby figure of another man Masters had not seen before. There were smoking guns in their hands. Only then did Masters understand why he was alive; why Sprule's hired killers had gone down faster than he had been firing. Redfield came over too. He was white with pain from his wound but his eyes were shiny. He clutched Phil's hand tightly and said, "I'm glad you're back with us Doc."

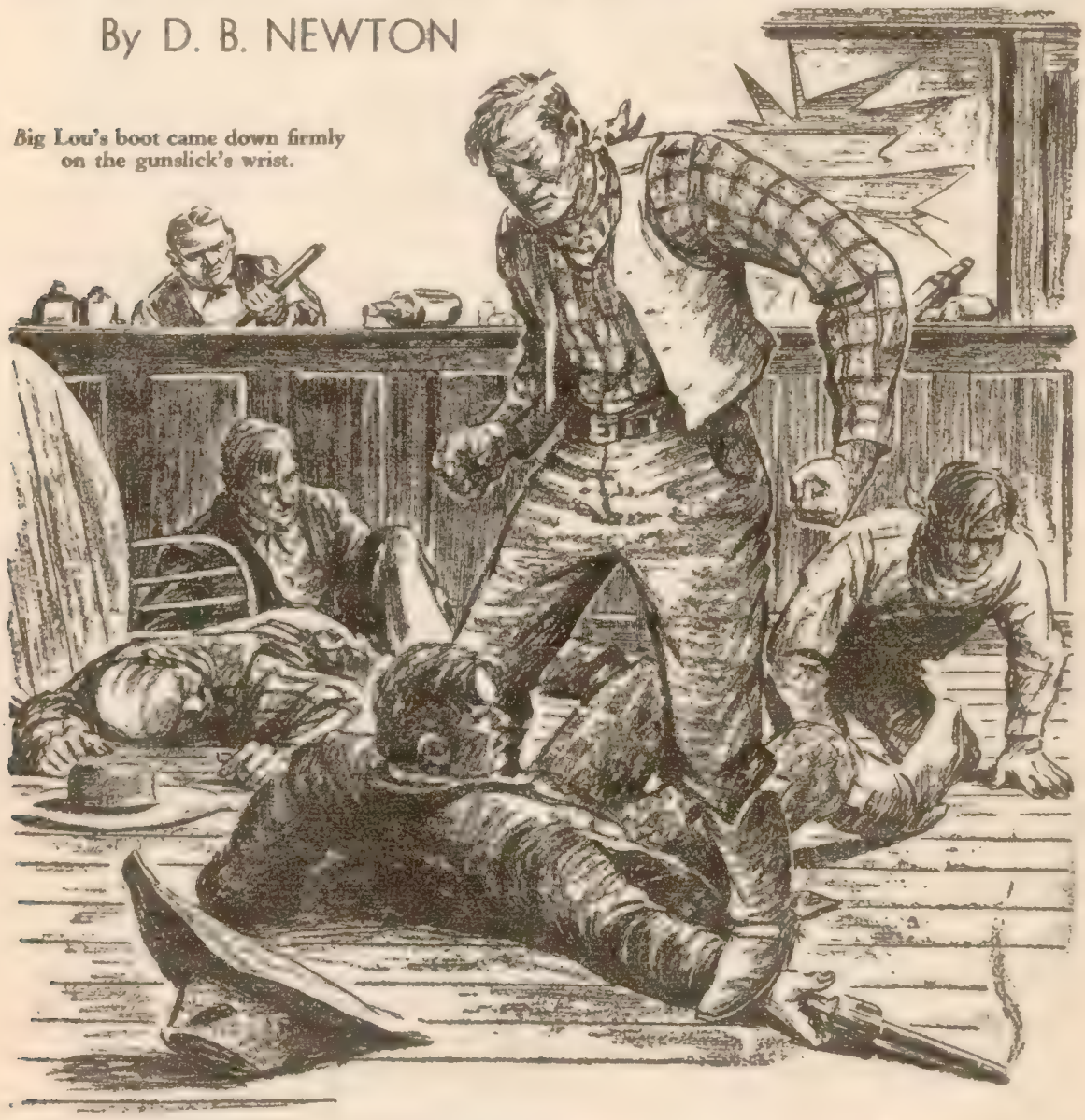
SHARON was waiting for him outside in the big living room that held so much of Charlie Britton's spirit. Her full, expressive lips held a smile for him. She said, "We're partners now, Phil."

He came up to her, and took her hands. "Partners," he said softly.

THE END

Owlhoot Brotherhood

By D. B. NEWTON



Big Lou's boot came down firmly on the gunslick's wrist.

Big Lou, for all his bone and muscle, was as dumb as a salt-block, while his shifty little pardner, he knew, was smart as a buggy whip. Together, they made a good team—but separated, they made a great one!

WITH an angry bellow, big Lou Brady bunched his shoulders and waded in. He scattered three of the hoodlums like straws, their blows hardly stinging his ugly face; while the swing of one great fist connected and laid a man motionless in the sawdust.

The back bar mirror went out in a smash of bottles and glassware. Brady saw the frightened saloon owner dive for cover, and he saw powdersmoke spiraling from Spud Renton's sixgun. Then Lou Brady got to Renton.

Before Spud quite knew what was happening his body caromed off the bar and struck the floor. He shook the ringing out

of his ears. Vision clearing, he peered up at the giant towering over him; started to roll into a better position.

But Lou's boot came down firmly on his gun wrist, pinning it helpless against the floor. Brady didn't put his whole weight on that foot or it probably would have snapped the bone. He twisted it, though, back and forth, until Spud Renton howled with the pain and let loose of his smoking six-shooter. Then Lou removed his foot and gave the gun a kick that sent it skittering across the splintered boards, out of reach.

After that he stepped back where he could put his glance on all four of them at once. He said, heavily: "I reckon you boys better clear out."

There was murder in Spud Renton's face as he got slowly to his feet, but he didn't put up any more fight. His three cronies had quieted too.

They went, with ugly words and Renton's snaky look still on Lou Brady just before the batwings swung them out of view. That look bothered Lou. He had never seen such venom in a man's glance before, so fierce a threat.

Daughaday, coming around the end of the bar, was saying: "Mighty obliged to you stranger for stepping in; hope it don't get you into more trouble with that crowd. They hurt you any?"

Lou shrugged, shook his head. "You can't hurt me; Ed Heath always says I wouldn't have sense enough to know it if you did.

"I just didn't feel like standin' around and lettin' those hombres bust up your place for no reason at all."

A bottle stood intact on the bar. Daughaday shoved it toward him, his usually jovial face solemn. "Have all you want," he offered. "Renton and his crowd from over at the Sink have been threatening for long time now—ever since I caught Renton cheatin' in a poker game and told him I wouldn't allow any of them in the Three Spot again. They'd have done the job today if you hadn't stopped them."

A MAN came hurrying into the Three Spot, breathless, and bringing the chill of the afternoon in with him. He had a sheriff's star on his vest, and had come running when he heard the shooting. Daughaday told briefly how Spud Renton's crew had invaded the empty saloon and tried to wreck it, and how this stranger had taken a hand. And the sheriff turned and measured Lou's six feet three inches with a respectful eye.

But he made big Lou Brady feel uncomfortable, somehow ashamed of his size. People always stared at him like that. All bone, muscle—but no brain to go with it.

"I'm Joe Trout," the sheriff introduced himself. Awkwardly, Lou closed a heavy paw over the officer's hard fingers, mumbling his own name. "Don't know where a couple of good riders could get a job here abouts, do you?" he asked.

Trout frowned. "Round-up was early this season," he said. "The outfits are layin' off hands right now rather than hirin' them."

"So I heard. And me and Ed Heath—that's my pardner—we was sort of lookin' to hitchin' on somewheres, what with winter blowin' in already. Have to hope for better luck farther on, I guess."

"Heath?" The sheriff's brow dragged down. "Little, wiry hombre? Sandy hair?"

"That's him. He's the brains of our combine. He told me he'd meet me here in a half hour—thought maybe he could round up some cash. We're mighty low."

Trout whistled softly. "Sorry to tell you this, but your friend's over at the jail. Locked up!"

Big Lou, having picked up the whisky bottle, set it down again with an unsteady hand. He stared at the officer, and could only say stupidly, "You—you sure?"

"Mike Fancher of the 7F is in town with a wallet full of beef money on him. Your pardner tried to lift it off him when he wasn't lookin'. Mike caught him dead to right. . ."

ELBOWS on knees, Ed Heath sat with the light through the barred window falling coldly over his slight body and bringing out the bleak lines of his face. "You go to hell!" he said again.

Lou rubbed his jaw with the knuckles of one hand, homely face frowning unhappily. "Look, Ed. I—I savvy I've no business talkin' up to you; you got all the cleverness in you that I ain't, and I'd never get nowheres without you plannin' and figurin' things out for me. But—well,

I thought you was all through with this sort of thing. Why'd you have to do it?"

Heath shrugged. "The money was there. And a pair of saddletramps like us sure as hell needed it."

"But what'll we do now?"

"I dunno what *you're* gonna do," Ed told him sourly. "Me, I'll just set here in this icebox till the judge comes on circuit next week. Then I'll set some more. Six months, likely."

Lou looked at him through the door, troubled. A cold draft came along the corridor, and Ed Heath's hunched body shivered.

He went into the office up front, where Sheriff Trout was worrying a fire to life in the tiny heater. "It's chilly in there," Brady told him.

The sheriff nodded in sympathy. "Yeah, I know. The county taxpayers never voted money to fix those cells so's they could be heated. It's too damn bad."

"When's the judge due?"

"Next Wednesday."

Lou stood there biting his lips, thinking about Ed in that cell with the chill of winter setting in. He said: "What about bail, sheriff?"

Trout pursed his lips, looking out the window at the early night. "I ain't properly got the authority to set bail," he said. "But maybe—well, I guess for about five hundred, say, I could turn him over to your custody."

Five hundred! Big Lou shook his head helplessly. Outside, on the steps of the jail, he paused as he buttoned up his coat, squinting at the sky. The gray edge of a cloudsheet was moving in over the ridges to the north; a sharp wind came swirling down the dusty street, in advance of it. There was a hint of snow. . . .

Lou Brady found Daughaday at the Three Spot, readying for the evening trade, and told him what he needed. Daughaday nodded. "Five hundred's quite a sum," the saloon man admitted. "But except for you Renton's crowd would have turned my place into matchwood this afternoon. I reckon I can let you have the money."

"You'll get it back," big Lou assured him. "Next week, when the judge arrives. I'll only need it till then."

There wasn't any bank in town, and the safe in Daughaday's office was generally full. He counted out the money for the bail.

"I got an empty room upstairs," Daughaday said. "You can have that for nothing, while you're here in town."

Lou turned the bail over to the sheriff; and after Trout had admonished the prisoner firmly and instructed him to report at the courthouse the following Wednesday, big Brady took his partner over to their room above the Three Spot. Heath was surly. He didn't have much to say, except once when he muttered: "A lot of good this is gonna do! I'm free until Wednesday, but after that—"

He started to cough. He had picked that up in the drafty cell room.

This room wasn't much better, but at least it was warm here. "I think you better get into bed," Lou suggested. "Don't want you gettin' sick. I'll go round up something to eat."

"I'm all right," Ed growled. "Leave me do the thinkin'."

LOU found a restaurant down the street, where he bought some sandwiches and a pot of hot coffee. He also located a druggist and paid for a small bottle of cough syrup out of their diminishing funds. As he headed back to the Three Spot, a few flakes of snow stung his face. That suddenly reminded him of the horses. As soon as he got rid of the food he was carrying he'd put them up for the night.

Too many details for a slow-witted lunkhead like him to keep straight. He was sure lost without Ed Heath running things. How on earth would he get along after next week, when the judge came around?

When he knocked on the door of their room, there was no answer. He went in. Ed wasn't there.

Lou stood for a long minute with the food and medicine in his hands, puzzled. Then he put the packages on the table and went downstairs, thinking his friend might be in the bar; but he wasn't there either. Lou shrugged heavy shoulders. After all, Ed was his own boss. Lou didn't have any right giving him orders, even if he didn't like the idea of Ed being out when he might have a touch of flu in his system.

So he went to tend to the horses. It was almost full dark now. A deep blue light filled the street, and snow was coming down faster and beginning to blow in streaks of

white through all the frozen wheel tracks.

Lou's horse, stamping and blowing at the hitch rack, jerked his head in welcome as the big man came into view. But the space next to it was empty. Ed Heath's roan gelding was gone.

He knew, then, what it meant; and the truth stunned him. Slowly, with numb fingers, he untied the reins and took his own bronc around to the livery stable, and turned it over to the old man there. Then he went back to the room and sat on the bed, staring dully at the bottle of medicine, and at the coffee that was getting cold because he didn't have the appetite now to drink it.

He couldn't fool himself. Ed Heath wasn't coming back. Afraid to face the judge, he'd skipped bail and run out on his partner, leaving him with that five hundred he'd borrowed. Lou's eyes misted a little. He hadn't figured Ed would ever do that to him.

Not that he could blame Ed, either. Who'd want to hang around with a sure jail sentence staring him in the face? But five hundred dollars—

Lou couldn't sleep much that night, worrying about it. If he'd only been born with a few brains inside his big, ugly head! But he fought the bed all night, wondering how he could pay off that debt. And when day streaked grayly into the room, the window showed a thin white scum of snow across the world outside.

He went downstairs and found Daughaday. A stubborn pride rebelled at the thing he had to say, and it was hard to get the words spoken. "Put me to work!" he managed to blurt out. "I reckon I can learn enough to pour liquor out of a bottle. And if the boys get out of hand I'll keep 'em in line." And he told what Ed Heath had done. "Just gimme my room and something to eat, and I'll work for you till you figure I've paid off the money I borrowed."

The friendly saloon owner didn't like that idea very well; it seemed to him like taking advantage of the man who'd done him a favor the day before. But Lou Brady insisted, doggedly. It never once occurred to him that he might follow Ed's example, and run out on his debt. He wasn't that clever. And so, instead, Lou Brady went to work at the Three Spot.

WEDNESDAY came and passed. Sheriff Trout was furious when he learned what had happened, but there was nothing he or the judge could do about it. Lou apologized, humbly. There was nothing he could do, either.

He wondered about Ed Heath, sometimes. The first snow melted; then the weather tightened up again and there was another heavy fall, and the mercury dropped twenty degrees in an hour. What if Ed were sick with the flu somewhere?

It was a morning the week after Ed Heath's disappearance that Matt Kimmel happened along by the Three Spot, where a big freight wagon had backed up to the door and Lou Brady was unloading barrels of liquor. Kimmel was a short, stocky German, with a three inch beard. Even in this cold weather he'd left his coat at home; and his shirt, opened across his barrel chest, was rolled up at the sleeves revealing the bulging cords of muscle that lay along his forearms. Yet he stopped in wonder to watch big Lou wrestle with the heavy barrels.

After he'd seen the third one rolled out of the wagon bed onto the giant's knee, swung from there into his arms, and toted off as though it didn't weigh anything, Kimmel shook his head in disbelief and hurried away to talk to Daughaday. Presently he came outside, where Lou had just finished his job and wasn't even breathing very hard from it. The crown of Kimmel's hat reached only to big Lou's shoulder. He touched the latter on the arm, beamed up into his face as Lou turned. "Daughaday says you come vit me dis afternoon," he told him.

Lou went, puzzle. Kimmel took him to a great, dark building where there was a forge, and an anvil, and piles of iron scattered in the corners. He picked up a heavy mallet and handed it to Brady, and took a smaller one for himself. He worked the forge, blowing up the fire and starting a cherry wash of flame dancing across their faces and into the shadows of the smithy.

"Now," he said. "I set der pace vit der hammer, and ven I tap, you hit. Goot?"

Big Lou shrugged, nodded. The mallet, he saw, was the heaviest thing he'd ever tried to handle. And now the blacksmith swung the heated metal, dripping sparks, onto the anvil; and they began their work.

Kimmel set a terrific pace. The first blows were not so bad, but the soft iron chilled quickly and then it was a different story. And presently the metal had to be put back into the forge and the bellows worked again.

For an hour they toiled, with no words to break the *clang* of the mallets, and the working of the forge. At the end of that time both their shirts were wringing with their sweat, and Lou dropped his mallet heavily as Kimmel set down his own and replaced the metal in the fire.

"How you like it?" asked the blacksmith.

Lou grinned, mopping the sweat from his eyes with one sleeve. He had never been so tired, and yet there was an exhilaration about it. "That there is a man's job!"

"Maybe you like to vork for me, yah?"

But Lou hesitated. "I—dunno. I guess I'm just a dumb saddletramp. I couldn't be no blacksmith."

"Nah! Nah! the other insisted. "You got der arms, und de chest. Und you got der feel for it. You make a good blacksmith. I teach you everything."

"But there's Mr. Daughaday—"

"Ve talk it over already. He say it can be fixed. You start tomorrow morning. Goot!"

BIG LOU walked in a rosy dream back to the Three Spot. This was a thing he had never known before—the feel of belonging, of finding his place; of discovering at last the work where his qualities could assert themselves, and his faults would not betray him. The life that was cut out for him!

He was so lost in these strange new thoughts that he never noticed anything was wrong until he was well inside the Three Spot with the batwings pulsating behind him.

Confused, he halted. There were three men in the saloon, but they were not customers. They had masks over their faces, and blue gunmetal was a threat in their tense fingers. And then he saw Daughaday, moaning on the floor where a gunbarrel across his skull had placed him.

All those guns swung around and covered Lou Brady now as he came in and stopped still in the middle of the room. And at once, the three recognized him. "Hey, Spud!" one of them cried.

The door of Daughaday's office stood open, and looking through it Lou could see the iron safe standing open too. A man knelt in front of the box, eagerly shoveling coins and greenbacks into a canvas bag. He turned now, came erect and strode out into the big room with the bag in one hand and his gun in the other. The neckerchief had slipped down from over his face, but he didn't seem to notice. All his attention riveted on big Lou Brady, and sudden hatred leaped into his little eyes.

"You!" Spud Renton exclaimed. "What are you doin' here?"

"Keepin' order for Mr. Daughaday!" Lou snapped. The big man's shoulder muscles began to bunch, his strong blunt fingers curled tautly. "And you can put back that money and get out, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" Spud Renton was coming nearer, the gun steady, his eyes bright with his hate. "I'm squarin' accounts today. "I've got everything I want from Daughaday, right here in this bag. But I don't forget I owe you something for the steppin' on me you did last week. I'm settlin' that right—"

With surprising speed, big Lou's right arm shot out; the mighty fist gave Renton a clout on the ear that sent him staggering and jolted the gun out of his hand. Lou strode in on him, struck him again; Spud backed up, swung the heavy bag of coins, but it only landed against Lou's shoulder and he barely felt it. The bag flew out of Spud's fingers and money spattered brightly across the room.

Then Lou's left hand closed over Spud's shoulder and his right fist drew back to strike. "Tryin' to rob a swell gent like Mr. Daughaday!" he muttered. "You dirty rat!"

"Hold it!"

For a moment the pressure against his spine didn't quite register, but gradually the anger cleared out of big Lou's head enough to bring him to his senses. He cursed his thick headedness, then. For one of Spud's men he'd forgotten was right behind him, gun barrel jammed into his back. The other two were closing in, their weapons ready.

"Let him go!" the one behind him rapped out. Slowly, with an effort, Lou opened his hand and Spud ducked out of it.

Lou stood there, braced for the bullet.

THEN Ed Heath came out of the office. He had stayed to finish up the rifling of the safe, and he had a sack in one hand, too; and he also had a gun. Lou, looking past Renton, stared in disbelief. So Daughaday had been right! Ed had gone completely bad, after jumping bail, and joined up with Renton and the crowd over at the Sink.

Ed Heath was staring too, but his nimble brain could take in the whole meaning of this scene at one glance. Suddenly, without warning, the gun jumped in his hand; flame streaked from it. And with a scream Spud Renton jerked; the hammer fell, the bullet from his own gun slammed into the floorboards. And his lifeless body dropped over on it.

"Lou!" Ed Heath shouted. "Get out of here—for God's sake!"

Renton's three had turned on Ed Heath, stunned for a moment by the suddenness of the killing. But then one got control of himself, and with a curse jerked his gun up and fired. And Heath slammed back against the jamb of the door behind him. As he sagged there his gun spoke again, answering the fire of the three who had all opened up on him now. One of them stumbled and fell.

And then Lou Brady shook off the shocked numbness that held him, and plunged in. He had no gun. But he reached the man who had plugged Ed Heath, and grabbed his shooting arm with a jerk that almost wrenched it loose. The man yelled, beat at Lou with the weapon. Lou bent quickly, got a hand hooked around his leg. He straightened easily, as though the man were a sack of flour. He turned, a gun blasting its heat against his face as he did so. The bullet drilled past, missing by inches.

The last of Renton's crowd stood spread-legged, ready to jerk trigger again. Before he had a chance Lou hurled the man on his shoulders at him; they went down in a tangled heap. And were still.

Ed Heath was dying when Lou got to him. Lou knelt and lifted him up, his big hands trying to be gentle. At the sight of the blood on Ed's heaving chest, hot tears started down his homely cheeks, unashamed.

Ed shook his head, trying to grin. "Don't mind, Lou," he grunted. "I ain't worth it. You're too good for me—always were. I'm just a tramp. Smart, yeah—maybe! Just too smart for my own damn good!"

Lou mumbled: "You're gonna be all right, Ed."

"Not me. But you will, Lou—you're the salt of the earth." Ed closed his eyes. "I—I run out on you; I couldn't face what was comin' to me. But now maybe I've settled that a little. And I—I ain't afraid of this—"

Lou stood up, slowly. Men were shouting and rushing into the Three Spot, stamping freshly fallen snow in with them. The sheriff was there, helping them get Daughaday to his feet. Hardly anyone noticed big Lou.

Suddenly he was wishing for tomorrow to come. Tomorrow, and the feel of the big mallet in his hand again. Somehow, he knew things would come clearer to him then. His slow wit would function better, and he would understand.

Then, it would be all right.

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DON'T GAMBLE ON GERTRUDE!

By RALPH YERGEN

From the rear it was difficult to tell which of the trio was Gertrude.

Gertrude was probably the first burro to find a golden bonanza of her own. . . . And probably the first also to create a red-hot bushwhack trap for her two desert-rat owners.

IT WAS no use trying. Gertrude refused to budge another step forward. She stood with her head drooped as if trying to appear grieviously overlooked for such a small burro. One furry gray ear pointed skyward, the other sagged at half mast as her solemn brown eyes observed the two irate prospectors.

Faraway Fain pulled his ancient corncob pipe from beneath his flame-colored mustache and gave explosive vent to his feelings. "Consarn your ornery hide Gertrude, you ort to have sense enough to savvy this bone-dry chunk of hell ain't no place to camp. Giggle Creek ain't more'n a couple mile long. Come on, blast you."

Faraway rammed the pipestem between his teeth and tugged at the lead rope with all the rawhide strength of his stringy, stooped body. "Give 'er a boost from behind, Scoot."

Burly, sandy-browed Scoot MacDuff planted a huge boot against the burro's tail and shoved with all the power of his stocky leg, his grizzled face purpling with the effort. "Hoot mon, this bur-ro's a stubborn beast," he muttered through the dripping sweat.

Gertrude simply braced her forelegs and froze to the ground until both men gave up for the fortieth time.

Scoot MacDuff ripped off his battered range hat and rumpled his thick shock of sand gray hair. "Mon, but it's a tough score we got to settle with the lyin' hombr-re back in Oro which took our good silver-r for this worthless animal."

Faraway Fain leaned against a jackpine and reloaded his corncob with a gnarled thumb. "We been sold a long-eared fake," he agreed. "That grub and them camp trappings and tools on her lazy back don't weigh much more'n a hundred pound'. But she ain't moved a lariat length since mid-afternoon. When we built a fire under her, she only wiggled far enough to get clear of the smoke."

"It's a dr-ry camp we'll be makin' in this lizard's den. And not a soft rock in sight to rest our weary bones. Plague take this obstinate offspring of per-rver-rsity."

"Look out you don't get your Adam's apple de-located on them double-barr'l cuss words, Scoot," warned Faraway, as he began to unpack camp supplies from the burro's back. "I'll mosey around and look for a spring while you're settin' up camp."

Faraway selected a battered pail and wandered up a brush-blotched slope. He headed northward, his tireless legs propelling him over the rocks and wind-felled jackpines. It was rough going, and he swore as he barked his shins on a concealed boulder. But he kept on.

THE SUN ducked below the high Eagle-rock ridges to the west. The cool fragrance of dusk drifted from the glades, and on some distant crag an awakened cougar squalled weirdly. Disgruntled after tramping half a mile, Faraway was on the verge of giving up his quest for a spring and striking directly toward Giggle Creek. But suddenly the soft, tinking music of dripping water brought a spark to his faded blue eyes.

He descended into a mossy hollow where water was oozing from a fissure in the rock and dripping into a grass-fringed bowl. His attention followed a worn trail upslope to a compact log cabin nestling against a dark wall of pines.

A huge, bear-girthed man was tilted back in a chair against the cabin logs. A brown jug rested on the ground beside him. He appeared to be asleep, but Faraway sensed that the small, piggish eyes set in the full-moon face were wide open and watching him sharply.

Faraway called, "Howdy, pardner. How about some frog juice?"

The man didn't move nor speak. He just sat there as if he hadn't heard a sound.

Faraway raised his voice to a hog-calling pitch. "Any squawk if I hook onto a pail of water?"

Without moving, the man grunted, "Reckon not."

Keeping a wary eye on the watcher, Faraway scooped the pail full and retreated into the bushes. He wasn't sure if the man was hostile or just too lazy to talk.

When Faraway reached camp, a small cooking fire was burning low within a ring of stones. Gertrude had not moved an inch. But Scoot MacDuff was nowhere to be seen. Unworried, Faraway set down the bucket and looked about for the coffee pot. He found it packed full of eggs and old newspaper.

He was removing the eggs with care when a tell-tale noise behind made him spin. Gertrude's head was buried in the bucket, and she was sucking the last drop of water.

Hot rage swarmed over the prospector. With a crackling blast of profanity, he dropped three eggs and leaped at the burro. Gertrude's head jerked out of the dry pail just as Faraway's boot came in solid contact with her opposite end.

"You long-eared, sneak-hearted son of a jellyfish," Faraway raved. "I ort to chop off your tail right behind your ears."

He was drawing back his feet for another thump when an indignant bellow from the draw filled his ears.

"Unfoot that bur-ro, you cr-rool, in-

hoomon fiend! Don't you dare strike her!"

Faraway stared. It was Scoot MacDuff, trotting toward the camp, shaking his fist like a wildman.

"Ger-rtr-rude is a pal good enough for any mon," Scoot was thundering. "I dinna stand for a hot-collared old soak kickin' her around like a toad stool."

"Who's a hot-collared old soak?" Faraway blazed, mustache bristling as he wheeled on Scoot. "I can kick this dratted canary anytime I feel like it. I paid cold cash for half of her."

"You canna be kickin' this bur-ro when a kind-hearted mon like Scoot MacDuff be around. She belongs half also to me."

Faraway jammed a crooked forefinger under his partner's blunt nose. "I ain't taking' orders from no broken-down heather rat. I own half of the burro. I can kick my half anytime I say. And no bull-headed Scotcher with a burr in his tonsils had better be tryin' to stop me."

Scoot walked over to Gertrude and patted her fondly on the neck. "Nize Ger-rtr-rude. Nize bur-ro," he crooned.

Faraway stared. Surely his old partner had gone crazy. But an hour before he had been cussing the burro with a vigor and sincerity which Faraway himself could scarcely equal. Faraway tried once again to shake reason back into the Scotsman.

"Listen to me, you fat hunk of mutton between the ears. You know what that yaller-blooded burro just got through doin'? After I hobble hell only knows how many miles over rocks bigger'n bunkhouses to find a spring and stumble all the way back spillin' half the water, Gertrude sneaks up and guzzles every confounded drop when I ain't lookin'. If you figger that's so amuzin', try goin' after a pailful yourself."

Scott grinned complacently. "Little Ger-rtr-rude canna help a thirst. She is a bur-ro fit for a king."

He fumbled in his pockets, drew forth a handful of dirty, yellow-streaked quartz chips. He dumped the jagged pieces into Faraway's hands. "Cool down once and be takin' a good look at these rocks while I hunt up Ger-rtr-rude some sugar."

Faraway stared at the contents of his cupped fingers. His pipe slipped unnoticed from his teeth. "Where—where did you find it?" he barked excitedly.

Scoot fed a lump of sugar to the burro. "Up yon draw a wee ways. In a crevice under some brushes. Come on. I'll be showin' ye."

They rushed up the draw like excited schoolboys, their argument forgotten as quickly as many another such along the trail of years during which they had roamed the wilderness together.

WHEN they returned to camp, Faraway was rambling like a drunken auctioneer. "It's the strike I've dreamed about for forty yer'. When we get that pocket cleaned out, we'll be richer'n cream cheese. If Gertrude hadn't of got ornery right where she did, we'd have moseyed right on to Giggle Creek and never knowed there was a nugget within ten mile' of here."

Faraway's voice turned remorseful. "I ort to be ashamed of myself the way I treated that there burro. You was right, Scoot. A crool, inhuman fiend is me all over. But I reckon I ain't too old to turn over a new leaf. Beginnin' right now I'll treat Gertrude like an angel. I'll never even cuss her again."

They walked into camp and looked about queerly, then looked at each other.

"Where's Gertrude?" Faraway asked.

"She dinna be aboot," the Scotsman said, mystified.

Faraway scanned the ground. "Here's her tracks. Headin' northwest. How in the hell did that bat-eared, coffee-eyed canary get the idea she could go gallivantin' around all night?"

"The spavined, low-withered hunk of a female Satan," Scoot exploded. "An hour ago we canna move her with a stick of dynamite. Now I'll have to be chasin' all over hell's half an acre to find her. Gettin' dar-rk, too. When I ketch up with the imp-brained crittur-r, I'll be bootin' her hind end clean back to camp!"

Through the cooling shades of dusk, Scoot MacDuff trailed the errant burro. Faraway had returned to the spring for more water. His mention of the cabin and the man in the easy chair kept revolving in Scoot's thoughts.

Any cabin dweller in this remote area of the Eaglerock Mountains was strange. The man could be mining. But summer gold seekers rarely built anything as permanent as a log cabin. More likely he had some connection with outlawry. And if so, he

would form an ever-present threat to their gold findings.

Scoot was still thinking about it when he caught up with the burro. He was threading a thick grove of pine timber, and the fuzzy gray outline of Gertrude's hind quarters became visible against the background of a high pole fence. Gertrude was gazing hungrily between the rails at three horses munching oats within.

Scoot walked up to the fence, and his eyes narrowed as he saw that the horses were enclosed by a sizeable corral built in the thickest section of the grove. The horses bore no resemblance to each other. One was bay, another buckskin, the third a dirty brown. All wore saddle scars, and to Scoot's shrewd eyes the buckskin showed evidence of being ridden to within wind-breaking danger not many days before.

Scoot recalled rumors of a mysterious relay station somewhere in these Eaglerock Mountains, a place where a fleeing outlaw could get a fresh horse in exchange for his own and a handful of cash. The Oro sheriff, unable to locate such a spot, had labelled the story a myth. Now Scoot suspected the place was more than imaginary.

Suddenly his roving gaze halted on the figure of a man seated on a log deep in the thickening shadows. A chill crawled up his spine. The man was so motionless that he seemed part of the wood. He was long-jawed and hulking, with a molasses-dark face and a black hat. Small, close-set eyes peered unblinking at the prospector, who sensed that he had been under silent observation all of the time.

"Evening, my good mon," Scoot said politely.

The man on the log did not speak nor change expression. A queer, spooky feeling shivered through Scoot MacDuff.

"The smell of yon oats was too much for the bur-ro," he explained. "She'll no be botherin' ye again." He snatched the lead rope and drew Gertrude away from the corral.

Man and burro were quickly swallowed by the grove shadows.

WHEN the sounds of their leaving had faded into the lonely hush of mountain twilight, the man on the log rose soundlessly, thrust an empty feed bag under his arm and stalked along a worn trail that serpentined among the tree trunks. He came to a log-walled cabin and entered it without knocking. A smoky kerosene lamp humped on a table littered by dirty dishes. The flame flickered raggedly off a corner of the wick, casting a yellow glow over the ponderous mass of a man who overloaded a rawhide bottom chair in the room's corner.

The long-geared man said, "Pap, we got neighbors."

The big man squinted his green eyes. "Reckoned as much," he grunted. "One old geezer has been twicet to the spring already. Prospectors or I ain't Napoleon Jower in person. Did they spot the corral, Cash?"

Cash nodded. "One of 'em come a-snortin' after his burro. You figger they'll sing to the sheriff, Pap? They could spile our set-up plumb easy. We got a good payin' bizness here. Buys all our grub and corn likker."

Napoleon Jower considered at length. He reached for a jug and took a noisy swig. He was still considering between pulls at the jug when another long-built man the image of Cash slouched into the cabin. He sat down on a bench and stretched enormous feet to the floor's center. A greedy glitter in his eyes, he looked first at Cash and then at old Napoleon.

"Two prospectors camped down in the draw, Pap," he reported.

"Hell, we know that," Napoleon grunted.

"Yeh? But there's somethin' you don't know."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh. They just struck a hog-rich pocket!"

Napoleon's greenish eyes bulged. He took a quick snort from the jug. "You sure, Jinks?"

"Damn sure. I was hidin' up on the rim, watchin' all the time. I heerd every word they said. And they said plenty. They hit the jackpot, sure 'nuff. Right where I rode past it a dozen times. It ain't justice, it ain't. Gimme a swig of that there corn likker, Pap."

Jinks Jower gulped a goodly portion, passed the jug back to his father. The glitter in his eyes intensified.

"Pap, what say we go down to that camp tonight when it's good and dark. We'll beef both of them old geezers and throw 'em down Bluebelly Canyon where like as not

nothin' but buzzards will ever see their bones. Then we'll have that there gold all to our lonesome."

A pained look crossed Napoleon Jower's moon-shaped face. "Jinks, I'm downright ashamed of you," he scolded. "You're a disgrace to the name of Jower. Yessir, you are. We won't do nothin' of the kind. Not us."

Napoleon took another drink, sucked the spillage from his beard stubble. Then went on:

"We'll just sit here and keep an eye on them yahoos until they've mined all that gold. When they've got the work all done and ready to pull out, we drill 'em in the back and take the stuff. That way, all the work we'll have is spendin' the money."

"Pap, you got a brain in that there fat noggin' of your'n," Cash complimented.

"Yeh," the big man agreed. "You boys is mighty lucky you got old Napoleon around to do your thinkin' for you. Otherwise, you'd work yourself plumb to death."

DAYS raced by swiftly at the camp in the draw. Scoot and Faraway labored from the first gray light of dawn until darkness robed the mountaintops. The vein equalled their fondest hopes. They hacked a cavern in the ravine wall big enough to house a grizzly, and still that streak of richness continued.

They almost forgot their neighbors in the pine cabin, although one day Scoot mentioned a persistent feeling that they were being watched.

"Nonsense," Faraway scoffed. "The only thing that's watchin' us is them buzzards up in the sky. And that's only on account of your takin' your socks off at night."

"But ye'll no be denyin' them hombr-res are livin' on hoss-trade deals with outlaws. Which is only a wee bit short of makin' them outlaws, too," Scoot maintained.

Faraway lighted his corncob and squinted at the lowering sun. "That bunch is too hog-lazy to mosey this far from their shack. Every day when I got up there after water, that old elephant is squattin' on the seat of his pants in the shade. Only time he ever moves is when the whiskey jug needs a refill. Them boys ain't much more for ambition. Reckon they don't even know we made a strike."

"Mebby ye're right, Faraway," Scoot admitted. "Never do I see a one of 'em prowlin' the camp. But I'll be feelin' easier when our pickin' is safe out of these humps."

Faraway scratched his ear and reverted to his favorite topic. "It's goin' to take us a while to get used to bein' rich men. Reckon I'll buy a big bizness so I can kick somebody else around."

"Always I had a hankerin' for a bonnie, high-toned hotel," Scoot declared. "I'd like to try sleepin' in a bed once, with spr-rings and sheets and a pillar of goose down."

"Better shove a few rocks in the mattress or you'll likely never wake up," Faraway advised. "Be a hell of a note to snore your whole life away like that old Rip Winkle hombre. Me, I might get me another canary like Gertrude and mosey around in the hills just pretendin' like I'm lookin' for gold so's folks won't think I'm high toned."

"Dinna forget our Ger-rtr-rude. "We'll be taking' good care of her. She'll be eatin' green clover and gettin' cur-ried twice a day."

"Yeah. Good old Gertrude. We'll never cuss the long-eared angel again."

Finally, the vein ended, and four hundred pounds of carefully selected pay rock rested within the prospectors' cache.

"The pocket's cleaned," Faraway asserted, as he sponged the sweat from his forehead. "Reckon there's a hundred thousand wuth if there's enough to buy a teakettle. Fair to middlin' load for Gertrude. But she's never havin' to work again."

"When will we be pullin' stakes, Faraway?"

"Sunup, I reckon. We'll load the ore on Gertrude. And you and me will tote enough grub and trappings to get us back to Oro."

LIKE a magic flame, the rising sun transformed the high crags into broken rainbows of color. The morning songs of a thousand birds rippled through the crisp air. A new day was born in the Eaglerocks. The day of the prospectors' departure. But for a very good reason, the prospectors were not as yet departing.

In the fore, Faraway Fain was taking turns speaking to Gertrude in a cajoling whisper and savagely tugging at her lead rope. Behind, Scoot MacDuff was alternately petting Gertrude's fuzzy sides and boosting her forcibly with his bootsole. All methods proved futile.

Faraway launched into a smoking discourse of profanity, to which Scoot MacDuff added an encore.

"Of all the ornery, peg-headed, ox-stubborn critturs I ever seen, this fly-blowed excuse for a burro is the worst," Faraway fumed.

"A plague to the earth. And a maker of sinners," quoth MacDuff.

The sorrel-thatched prospector shook his head hopelessly. "She ain't gonna move with that load, Scoot. No use wastin' more time. What say we trade her for one of them hosses up at Jowers'?"

"A bonnie plan. But what of the boot? We was robbed of our last penny in buyin' this four-legged fake. It's pay rock we would have to be usin' for money. And once the Jower tribe ogled such r-rich ore—"

Faraway nodded. "Right, Scoot. They'd figger we had a lot more of it or we wouldn't be wantin' a hoss to haul it. They could pull a bushwhack on us somewhere along the trail. We got to play 'er safe and not let nobody know."

"We could cache some of the load," Scoot suggested. "Mebby Ger-rtr-rude would no balk at totin' half."

"We can try the scheme. But I sure hate to leave a dime's worth. Them Jower jiggers would likely find it before we could get back. Let's try it and see how it works, anyhow."

Two hours later, they gave up again. Lightened by half, the load was still distasteful to Gertrude, and she refused to budge an inch. They tried reducing the weight further, but Gertrude was adamant. It became apparent that she had no intentions of carrying any ore whatsoever out of the Eaglerocks.

The day wore on, and a sultry heat hung in the canyons. After a cold lunch, Scoot and Faraway sat in the shade, smoking and inventing new phrases to befit the burro. As the sun dipped toward the west rims and the deepening shadows cooled the draw, they tried again. But Gertrude had not changed her mind in the sllightest.

Finally, Faraway reached the inevitable conclusion. He said to Scoot, "If we got to tote that rock out of here ourselves, we'll travel at night while it's cool. And we might as well start now."

They packed their food and camp sup-

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plies on Gertrude's back, and filled their own pack sacks with the ore.

"If that cross-eyed, knock-kneed pile of orneriness won't foller us now, she can stay here till she rots," Faraway said. "We can get by without grub. Come on, Scoot. Let's go."

ON A brushy shelf overlooking the narrow trail that rimmed Bluebelly Canyon, the Jower family was securely ensconsed.

Napoleon Jower was a man who cordially disliked the thought of moving a muscle. Before daylight that morning, he had walked all the way from the cabin to this brushy bench which afforded a clear view of the trail. And now that he had wallowed out a comfortable seat in the hillside, he protested vigorously against his sons' attempts to argue him into walking all the way back to the cabin with their mission unfulfilled.

"We'll stick right here until them two pesky prospectors come along," Napoleon commanded firmly. "There's only one way they can reach the main Oro trail. And that's along the ledge right down there in front of us."

He pointed to the dim trail which hooked sharply out of the thickets of a wedge-like ravine and spiraled along the canyon wall until a bend blotted it from sight. From their vantage point, the canyon depths formed only a dark, empty pool.

"But Pap," Cash argued. "They might not come along here for a week. Jinks claimed he heard 'em say they was startin' this mornin' at sunup. But they ain't showed up yet. Mebby they won't."

Jinks stared uneasily. "Mebby I didn't hear 'em right. I was quite a ways off. Mebby it was tomorrow at sunup. Anyhow I'm gittin' powerful hongry."

Napoleon thumbed the jug at his elbow. "There's plenty likker left, boys. You got not call to be hongry."

"Let's go salivate 'em in camp," Cash suggested impatiently.

"Now keep your shirt on, boys," Napoleon soothed. "You know blamed well we couldn't leave dead men layin' around in plain sight for lawmen to paw over. We'd have to lug 'em clean over here to dump 'em in the canyon. Why go to all that hard labor when we can drill 'em in the back and just roll 'em over the edge? Then again, they'd likely have their gold cached, and we'd have to go to all the trouble of huntin' the cache. We got a perfect set-up here. When they come out of the brush, they'll be headed the other way. A clear shot. And no risk to us. If we raided their camp, they might pick off one of us first. Some of them old gold-sniffin' rats can get mighty fancy with a six."

"Reckon you're right as usual, Pap," Jinks agreed. "Gimme another pull on that there jug. I'm still hongry."

Napoleon's fat fingers closed over the jug. "Hold it," he whispered. "Somethin's movin' down there. Comin' along the trail. Through the brush."

The three Jowers reached for their rifles.

Dusk dimmed the outline of the trail below. Although made indistinct by the deepening shadows, the first figure turning along the ledge was obviously that of a lean man with bent shoulders.

"It's the skinny old coot," Napoleon muttered.

Following him by ten feet came the block-like figure of the second prospector. Last of all, the burro came plodding along, the pack on her back making her look ludicrously fat.

"Get an aim, boys. Right where the suspenders cross," Napoleon murmured, leveling his own weapon. "Take your time. Wait till I give the signal. The light ain't good. We can't afford to miss."

"I got a dead bead on the first jigger," Cash boasted.

"The second hombre is fillin' my sights," Jinks muttered.

"I'll hold fire in case one of you misses," Napoleon said. "Let 'er rip!"

TWIN jets of flame needled the dusk. Powdersmoke swirled in a thin cloud. The double roar hammered the canyon walls in a rocking blast of fiendish echoes.

"I nailed mine," Cash yelped. "Knocked him clean off the ledge."

"Mine's a gone duck," Jinks howled. "Look at him kick. There he flounders into the canyon. We don't even have to roll 'em over the edge. Now for the burro, huh, Pap?"

"Hold it, you damned crazy fools!" Napoleon bellowed. "If you plug that jackass, it'll go overboard, too. You want to tote that gold all the way out of the canyon?

The burro's heavy loaded. We can ketch her plumb easy."

Cash and Jinks piled down the bluff, racing after the burro. Napoleon waddled along behind, wheezing and cursing the effort.

Frightened by the shooting, Gertrude scampered up the slope and vanished in the mahogany.

"After her!" Napoleon thundered. "She can't run far with that pack."

The Jower brothers plunged through the mahogany while Napoleon stood on the trail and listened to the brush crackling. At the point where the prospectors had gone over the edge, he peered down the steep canyon wall. The depths were gloomy and blue-black.

"Don't see hide nor hair of 'em," he commented. "Reckon they rolled plumb to the bottom. A good meal for the coyotes." He went on down the trail like a big duck, following the direction of the crackling brush.

"Can't find her, Pap." Jinks' voice boomed down the slope.

"Keep on lookin'. Faller the tracks."

"Too dark to see tracks. Hey, Cash! Did she go your way?"

Cash replied with a snarl of profanity.

Napoleon sat down on a big rock. The night thickened. Finally Jinks let out a yell of triumph from near at hand.

"I got the long-eared devil. She was hid in the mahogany right here close to the trail all the time we was runnin' all over hell." The next minute Jinks appeared leading the burro downslope. Cash followed a bit later. They all clustered on the trail while Jinks fumbled at the pack strings.

"Let's take a look and see if she totes the authority," Napoleon urged.

"This pack seems tol'able light to me," Jinks worried. "Hey! What the hell!"

"What's wrong," Cash barked.

"There ain't nothin' in this pack but grub and fryin' paos!"

The air blued with the smoke of their combined cursing.

"Likely that gold's in the bottom of the canyon!" Napoleon groaned.

"Right!" a grim voice spoke.

All three Jowers whirled as if they had been stung by hornets. And all three found themselves gazing into steady black sixgun muzzles.

Two bruised and bleeding prospectors, their clothes ripped to ribbons, were climbing over the canyon rim onto the trail.

Faraway Fain grinned. "Surprised, eh? Well, you got Gertrude to thank for your pickle. She did it again. Saved our bacon and turned the tables on you bushwhackin' thieves."

"But how the hell—" Cash puzzled. "We had dead beads."

"Sure you did. But we was each one totin' a couple hundred pounds of pay rock on our back. Your slugs couldn't get through that thick shell."

Scoot added, "They jolted us a wee bit and we rolled into yon canyon to play possum. But we dinna figure it so plagued steep. Hoot mon, but I'm still dizzy from that pinwheelin'."

While Scoot held the cowed Jowers at gunpoint, Faraway collected their weapons. "We left the gold at the bottom. Come daylight, you boys can tote it out. We'll help ourselves to your hosses. Ride two and use the other'n for a pack hoss."

"What about us?" Jinks quavered. "You wouldn't—"

Faraway chuckled. "No, we wouldn't think of leavin' you hombres way up here by yourselves. The sheriff will want to be entertainin' you at the county jug."

"But there ain't enough hosses," Napoleon protested. "And it's forty-five miles to Oro."

"That's right. Hope you hombres'll enjoy the hike."

"It's a fate wuss than death," Napoleon moaned.

Scoot was fondly slapping Gertrude's shoulder. "Nize bur-ro. Ye dinna have to ever walk another step if ye dinna want."

"Not while the Jowers is with us." Faraway looked significantly at his captives.

The Jower family uttered a collective groan. Gertrude wagged an ear in solemn contentment.

Blaze shouted, "One of us will never sail the river again!"

CAPTAIN MURDER!

By M. HOWARD LANE

CHAPTER ONE

Death for the River Queen

SAN FRANCISCO newspapers called the *Lovely Lass* the Queen of the Rivers, and eulogized her as the most beautiful thing afloat, and as she steamed proudly up the Sacramento on her maiden voyage, Captain Blaze Carvel agreed that the papers had made no mistake. A prouder man had never trod the deck of a ship.

Through the gleaming glass of the pilot house windows he surveyed his steamer, and the sky-larking crowds filling her decks.

The new motors pulsed like a giant heart.

Captain Blaze Carvel, proud river skipper, knew his only chance for survival was to avenge the drowned dead of his once proud queen of Western waterways. . . . He must raise and sail his wrecked packet, or forever tread her bloody decks, guarded by the ghosts of the honest men and women for whose death he must answer, to all the Gold Frontier!

A Smashing Novel of a Never-Say-Die Skipper

The boilers sang with power. The sun was a bright, golden orb hanging in the afternoon sky, and the green banks of the river had never seemed more beautiful as they flowed smoothly past the golden-white floating palace.

Her grizzled pilot covertly studied Blaze Carvel and his own pleasure was more for his captain than for the honor of piloting the queen craft of the river. It had been his hand that taught Cap Blaze to finger the spokes of a helmsman's wheel. That had been ten years ago, in 1850 when *The Oregon* had brought the great news to San Francisco that California had at last been accepted into the Union as the thirty-first state.

Blaze Carvel had been just another pink-cheeked youngster with the urge to make the gold coast his stamping ground. Why, old Hezekiah Brown even had the suspicion that Blaze had secretly rubbed grizzly bear

grease into his skin every night under the illusion that it would make his black whiskers sprout the faster. A lanky stripling then, with the promise of bigness to come, Blaze Carvel had taken to the river like a young duck to water. First a cub, then a full-fledged pilot, then skipper of his own vessel.

The pilot's eyes passed fondly over Carvel's solid length. A fine, big man with a square, honest face that looked as if it had been carved from old mahogany. Carvel was the finest captain he had ever served under. The young skipper's talents were appreciated by many. The Combine, the Northrup & Williams interests who were trying to choke independent traffic from the river had done their damnedest to hire him at any price, for his name was a drawing card. But they'd never succeeded.

"I'll draw pay from no man who tries to hog a river-way God created for the use of all mankind," he'd told them once in their fancy Montgomery Street offices. "There's enough business on the Sacramento for all of us!"

The *Lovely Lass* was the answer to that. The newly-formed Crandall Company had built her in open defiance of the Combine. Spent a fortune doing it, and they'd hired the best skipper on the river to be her master. "The Combine," Hezekiah Brown thought grimly, "will never get the best of Cap Blaze!"

But they'd be in for trouble, he could guess that too. The *Lass* was going to take an awful bite out of the Combine's business, and worse yet she'd steal their prestige, and give other men hope of doing likewise. Yes, if the *Lovely Lass* stayed afloat, the Combine was beaten, and on that thought an unaccountable chill shivered along the old pilot's spine. He laughed aloud to drive something almost like fear from his blood.

"We've come a long way, Blaze boy," he said softly. "There'll never be a finer steamer on the river than the *Lass*. She'll show her heels to any Northrup & Williams craft, and the cream of the trade will be yours."

The old pilot's words startled Blaze a little for he could see they'd both been thinking the same thing. His dark, sparkling eyes, deep-seated beneath black brows scanned his helmsman, and he nodded.

"Aye," his voice was resonant as the bass viol playing with the ship's orchestra aft on the saloon deck, "we've come a long way, Hez, and we'll go a lot farther with the *Lass*. We—"

He'd been staring aft over the shining decks, unconsciously feeling the heart beat of the ship through his boots, and now he felt the pulse of the motors change suddenly. The rhythm altered and he swung to grab the shining speaking tube that would reach the engine room, but his hand never touched it for the world seemed to end right then and there.

Captain Blaze Carvel heard the explosion, and the force of the blast flung him backward. He saw the head of the boiler rip the stout aft decking as though it were tissue, and flame and flying metal laced the decks. Scalding steam blanketed the Texas as the *Lovely Lass* listed to starboard, and Blaze saw screaming passengers jumping over-side. There were others who would never move again, and countless more writhing in agony on decks red with blood and fire.

Hez Brown, true to his code had clung to his wheel. It spun futilely beneath his hands as the *Lass* lost way, rolled sluggishly like a dying thing herself.

"We're sinking, Blaze!" he yelled.

Blaze Carvel stood for a moment like a man turned to stone, and then almost softly he said: "The water will cool the dead, mister. Beach her if you can. Somebody is going to pay for every life we've lost!"

THE REST of that afternoon was filled with the screaming hell all river-men dread, and Captain Blaze Carvel strode the smouldering decks of the *Lovely Lass* with a dazed look in his eyes, but there was nothing wrong with his tongue that whipped orders to crew-men and passengers alike, and there was nothing wrong with his big hands as they gently patted oil and flour into scalded flesh.

Every cabin was filled with injured and dying. The dead themselves lay sprawled as they'd fallen, and bushes along the river bank held bright bundles of color that had once been happy men and women celebrating the maiden voyage of the *Lovely Lass*.

He'd brought some order out of chaos and now as he strode the deck, he paused beside a tall, dark-haired girl he'd noticed before. She had seemed to be everywhere

at once, cheering the injured, bandaging burns.

He touched her arm, and got his first proper look at her face. Blood stained her cheek where a flying sliver had gashed her, but she had had no time to think of herself. Her eyes were a calm gray, unafraid of the sudden grim work that had been thrust into her hands, and Blaze felt a strange warmth come over him as he looked down into her oval face.

"Ma'am," he told her soberly, "you have done more than your share already. It is time you allowed someone to attend your own wound."

"Nonsense, captain!" the girl's voice was as cool as her eyes. "There are many who need care worse than me. You see I have studied the profession of nursing. Now if you do not mind—"

She hurried on before Blaze could reply. He turned as he heard Hez Brown call to him. "Come along, sir, I've found the engineer, and he ain't long for this world. He wants to speak with you. It's God's blessing he didn't die with the firemen, but the explosion flung him clear. He is bad scalded, though, and in great torment. I doubt if he'll live till rescue craft come from Sacramento."

Blaze turned after the pilot, and his eyes moved toward a bend upstream, but he knew it was futile yet to search the azure river for sign of aid. His first order had dispatched the mate overside to find the nearest farm house and a fast horse that would take him the ten miles overland to Sacramento with news of the recent disaster.

Grimly he followed Hez Brown to a forward cabin. The moans of wounded and dying coming through the partitions of other cabins was a sad aftermath to the music the band had been playing when the explosion occurred.

Brown darted like a terrier through an open cabin door, and leaning over the bunk Blaze saw the tall, slender nurse. She was as shapely and graceful, he thought irrelevantly, as the red willow that made the banks of the Sacramento so beautiful.

She straightened from arranging the engineer's pillow as Carvel advanced and shook her head ever so gently as she recognized him. Blaze stepped past her with a nod, and shock took hold of him. There wasn't much left of Jon Jonason's face. Death would come as a blessing to this once powerful man.

He laid his hand gently on the man's shoulder, realizing the engineer was sightless. "'Tis me, Jon," he said softly, and couldn't seem to find more words.

"Aye, Cap'n," the man mumbled. "Thank God ye've come. I've been holdin' on waiting to tell ye—"

"Yes," Blaze said and his grip had unconsciously tightened.

"There warn't, there warn't more'n a hundred and twenty-five pounds pressure in them boilers when she blew. I—I'd just checked the gauges. I wanted for you to know—" his words faded, and Blaze felt the man's tortured body go limp beneath his hand.

"A better engineer," he found himself speaking almost without realizing it, "never rode the river. And a better ship than the *Lovely Lass* never sailed her. One hundred and twenty-five pounds pressure. Why hell and damnation that shouldn't have been enough to blow the lid off a tea-pot!"

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CHAPTER TWO

"You Can't Kill a Good Ship!"

CARVEL heard the girl's feet move behind him, and Hez Brown's muttered curses and he straightened and turned. "Ma'am," he told her quietly, "I will appreciate it if you keep what you have just heard to yourself."

"My name is Mary-Lou McGinnis," the girl said simply. "My mother runs a boarding house on Kearney Street. The Irish," she added, "know when to keep their tongues in their heads. You need not worry about me, but," and her eyes scanned a captain who had aged ten years in two hours, "I would not care to be in the shoes of the guilty if you prove foul play caused this catastrophe."

"Nor would I, ma'am!" said Hez Brown.

A shout from the deck sent them all running for the door. Blaze heard the distant creak of rigging, the pulsing beat of engines pushing a steamer under forced draft. Aid had reached them sooner than he had anticipated.

It was in the black hours of night when the *Yuba Belle* nosed into her berth along Sutter's Embarcadero, but huge bonfires along the levee made it almost daylight bright silhouetting the masts and rigging of river schooners and the countless faces of thousands of people. Word of the disaster had spread about the city with the speed of a storm wind, and the giant fire bells of the city were still tolling in their towers when Blaze Carvel stepped ashore alongside Tom Prentiss, master of the *Yuba Belle*. Friends for many years, there was little need of talk between the young captain and the old.

At sight of Blaze, his first mate, Sam Breen, came hurrying up. He touched his cap, and gestured at rows of wagons piled deep with blankets.

"Every doctor in town is ready to go to work, sir, and we've rigged a hospital in a big house on K street. The undertakers are here too—"

"Good work, mister," Blaze complimented. "I'm afraid the undertakers are going to get the biggest share of the business. Tell them to send luggers downstream to pick the dead off the *Lass,* and from the river." He handed over a passenger list. "Better have this posted in the square where everybody can read it. Most of the passengers had friends and relatives here."

"Aye, sir," the mate nodded. "I also took the liberty of reserving rooms for you at the Congress House. Ye'll be needing rest, before heading for San Francisco to make your report to Mr. Crandall—"

Carvel's eyes were black coals deep-sunk in his skull. "I'll be staying with the injured, mister, until dawn and then I expect to take a launch down to look over the *Lass.* You don't think I'm going to let her rot on the river-bottom do you?"

"N—no sir. But she looked to me like a hopeless wreck."

"How she looks to me is the thing that counts," Blaze said grimly. "The *Lovely Lass* is not dead, mister. You can't kill a good ship. They are not like man. When a man's heart stops he's dead. When a ship's heart stops we tear it out and put in a new one. The *Lass* will sail again, if I have to raise her myself!"

"BIG WORDS!" Blaze heard someone behind him say. He felt his fists clench, but he kept them rammed hard in the pockets of his coat. This was no time for the heat in a man's blood to overpower the coolness of his head.

He turned to face Captain Gem Hawks, master of Northrup & Williams, *Cormorant,* prize Combine packet. A lean blade of a man, he seemed oblivious to the almost endless line of sheet-covered shapes stretcher bearers were carrying ashore, and to the tragic faces of men and women searching through the injured for dear ones they'd known were aboard the *Lovely Lass.* Cynicism gave his thin lips a crooked twist. Although he was only two years older than Blaze he looked nearer fifty.

A gold-headed stick rested in the crook of his arm, and his long box coat was elegantly tailored. His boots were speckless. They'd trod no decks slippery with the blood of men, and Blaze Carvel's temper flared at the thought.

"The *Lass,*" he said flatly, "will sail again!"

"Not from what I've heard," Gem Hawks said coolly. "I hear her bottom's gone."

"You must have heard that from the fishes!" Blaze snapped. "No man's looked her over. I say the *Lass* will sail again—with-

in three months!" Blaze added recklessly.

Gold jingled in Captain Hawks' hand. "I have a thousand that says she won't!"

"And I have another thousand," Blaze reached for his pocket, "that says she will. Captain Prentiss will hold the stakes if that's agreeable."

"Very agreeable," Gem Hawks' smile was saturnine, and after he turned away, Tom Prentiss shook his head.

"Son," he said softly, "ye let yourself get talked into something there. I'll lay ye another thousand that was Combine money not his own. If 'twas he had a reason for makin' the wager."

Blaze looked at the grizzled river skipper and slowly nodded. "You might be right, Tom," he answered quietly. "It would be worth a thousand to the Combine to learn our intentions."

Captain Prentiss shook his white head. "*Your* intentions, cap'n. You ain't talked to Asa Crandall yet."

Blaze laughed for the first time in hours. "Crandall & Company ain't going to lose their investment if there is a chance to raise the *Lass,*" he said confidently.

"The money for the *Lass* didn't come out of Crandall's pocket," Prentiss murmured. "It came out of the pockets of men and women," he went on with fire kindling in his voice. "who wanted to see a ship on the river that was more beautiful than the *Cormorant.* A ship that could sail rings around her, and show Northrup & Williams they don't own this river!"

"She'll show them yet!" Blaze said and he turned to help Hez supervise unloading of the injured.

DAWN found them scouting the *Lovely Lass.* She lay submerged as far as the saloon deck, and her lower cabin was entirely under water, but the list wasn't pronounced.

"She's in fine shape to raise," he told Hez Brown.

"Unless the bottom's out of her," his pilot agreed.

Blaze pointed grimly to the twisted wreckage of the upper decks. "The force of the explosion blew upward instead of down. I'll stake my name she'll be easy to refloat. Crandall ought to be just as interested as you and me," he lowered his voice, "in boilers that blow at one-twenty-five!"

Hez Brown tugged at his scraggy white mustache. "Ever strike you as a leetle odd that that thar Asa didn't sail with us'n yistiddy? Kinda traditional that the owner boards a new ship for her maiden voyage, ain't it?"

Blaze shrugged, and now that he had satisfied himself as to the condition of the *Lovely Lass* he found even that small gesture an effort. Sleep tugged at his eyelids, and he was suddenly glad that Sam Breen had reserved rooms at The Congress.

He signaled the crew to start the return voyage. "Shut-eye is what we need right now, mister," he said. "I'm done thinking for awhile. The *Yuba Belle's* set to sail at noon and we'll be aboard her. Dusk will see us in 'Frisco, and likely we'll find Crandall on the dock waiting. He'll be damned glad to know that the *Lass* ain't a complete loss."

"I hope so," Hez Brown muttered, "I hope so—"

In the Congress House, Blaze stripped to his underclothes, and stretched out on the bed in his room. He'd left orders with the clerk to rouse them in time to reach the *Yuba Belle,* and now as sleep closed his eyes, Blaze had one last memory-picture of a tall, calm-eyed girl as pretty as the red willows casting their shadows on the smooth-flowing waters of the Sacramento. On a river that had witnessed many disasters but none comparable to the loss of the *Lovely Lass.*

"Somebody will pay for it—" Blaze muttered, and then sleep closed his eyes.

In his dreams, he lived again the horror of screaming death. He was ordinarily a light sleeper but tonight more so. He heard the door hinges across the room creak, and the fall of tumblers in the lock as the knob turned. How long his eyes had been closed, Blaze did not know, but they opened at the sound, instantly alert, he saw the long barrel of a Colt revolver through the crack of the opening door. An eye was behind it, and a segment of face, then his body seemed to move almost of its own accord. He rolled sidewise as the weapon thundered, struck the floor on his hands and knees.

Through the gun-roar he heard the door slam shut, and pounding feet rush on along the outer hall. On his own feet, Blaze gave himself a look, then grunted ruefully, and turned back toward the bed. A man in long

underwear couldn't go running through the halls of the Congress House, even to trail a murderer.

He heard Hez Brown let out a yell in the adjoining room, and then the connecting door between their rooms crashed open, and the old pilot came crow-hopping into view, white hair flying, mustache bristling.

"Blaze," he yelled, "what in thunder—"

Captain Blaze Carvel stopped him with a chuckle that held no mirth, and his pointing finger was answer enough. A smoking, black-ringed hole bored the exact center of his rumpled pillow.

"I guess we'll owe the Congress House a new pillow-case, mister," he said quietly.

"Beats havin' 'em bring in a coffin!" Hez muttered, and then his old eyes that were the blue of the river itself turned hard as shiny bits of glass. "One-twenty-five," he mumbled. "Begins to appear like there's them here in town that don't want you raisin' the *Lass* and lookin' at her boilers!"

CHAPTER THREE

One-Twenty-five—Or Fight!

ASA CRANDALL was not on the docks when the *Yuba Belle* reached the Embarcadero that evening, but there were newsboys on hand, hawking *The Call* and *The Bulletin*.

Black headlines glared through the Spring dusk. Blaze bought a paper. He held it so Hez Brown could read, and as they perused the story of the disaster, Blaze felt angry sweat start on his forehead.

WORST TRAGEDY IN HISTORY
OF THE SACRAMENTO

> The *Lovely Lass*, according to reports, exploded and sank yesterday afternoon on her maiden voyage to Sacramento. One hundred known dead have been counted and at least another hundred are injured.
>
> Reports are still incomplete, but according to President Crandall, of Crandall & Co., owners of the steamer, there will be no attempt made to raise the once proud Queen of the Rivers. . . .

There was more to the article, and there were many other articles covering the front page recalling the history of the *Lass*, but Blaze Carvel's eyes had frozen on that second paragraph. It held his fascination.

"What's Crandall mean?" he demanded hoarsely. "There'll be no attempt made to raise the *Lass?* Driver," he signaled a waiting hack, "take us to Crandall and Company, and let that nag out!"

He sat holding the newspaper in his big hands as they rode up from the Embarcadero, idly riffling the pages like a deck of cards, and old Hezekiah Brown watched him with a frown of near pain on his forehead. Blaze looked as tortured as some of those injured they'd saved from the inferno that had been the *Lovely Lass*.

"Don't take it too hard, son," he counselled. "Hell, there's other ships for Cap Carvel to sail."

"None like the *Lass*," Blaze told him without looking up.

"Raisin' her ain't worth your life," his pilot pointed out. "Only God's grace saved you this mornin'. Forget her, son, ye'll live longer."

Blaze turned gleaming eyes on his companion. "We're going to raise the *Lass* and sail her to hell if we have to go that far to corner the whelps who made her blow!"

Gas lights were burning behind the windows of the company offices when their cab drew to a halt. Heavy shoulders hunched, Blaze pushed open the door, and a startled clerk jerked his thumb toward an inner office.

"G—go right in, Captain Carvel," he stammered. "Mr. Crandall has been hoping—"

Blaze paused for an instant at the swing-gate leading through the counter, and looked down at his knuckles as white as the newspaper crumpled in his right hand. Slowly he forced himself to ease the tension in his muscles. He was bucking clever, ruthless men.

Blaze raised his head, and his mahogany face was smooth as the blue jacket across his wide shoulders as he moved toward the inner office.

Asa Crandall saw him enter. He rose from behind his broad desk, a smooth-cheeked, full-faced man wearing carefully combed brown burnsides. His eyes were pale blue buttons in nested fat, and his mouth was a small red bud beneath his bulbous nose. Garbed in expensive gray broadcloth, he leaned forward across his

desk, and extended a fat bejeweled hand.

Blaze ignored it and spread his paper across the desk. "Mr. Crandall," he drawled, "there must be some mite of error in this item. It says you ain't planning on trying to salvage the *Lass*. I went over her this morning. She's in fine shape to raise. We can have her in service again in three months."

Crandall sat down and waved his hand toward a humidor of cigars. Blaze drew one instead from his own breast pocket. "Captain Carvel," Crandall put the tips of his fingers together beneath his fat chin, "I am afraid the newspaper account is correct." His voice was smooth as butter covering a slice of bread. "The Atlas Marine Assurance Co., will stand good for most of the loss, and assume control of the hulk. I am certain they will not try and raise the ship. Our investors will receive a share of their money back, and the insurance company will write off the expense. I am afraid we will have to give the river back to the Combine. Their luck seems better than ours."

"Their luck ain't a damned bit better than ours!" Blaze snapped. "The whole river was counting on us giving 'em a run for their money. The *Lass* brought hope to every independent skipper and shipping firm. She can be raised, and it won't cost a hell of a lot to do it."

"And the public would call her a ship of doom," Asa Crandall said. "We would have no passengers, and our investors would lose all the more. No, I am afraid we will have to write off the *Lass* as an expensive misadventure. Let the dead stay buried, Captain. And while we're discussing the subject, captain, you can pick up your pay on the way out. We will require your services no longer as you can well understand. Also, your ah, quarters upstairs had best be made available. I'm sure you will soon find another ship, unless," the thinnest edge of a smile moved his button mouth, "you persist in this foolish notion of claiming the *Lass* can be raised."

The man's last words burned into Blaze like the touch of a hot poker, and a pair of memory pictures flashed across his mind. He saw Gem Hawks' sardonic face as the Combine captain had made his wager that the *Lass* would never sail again. And he saw the slanting segment of another face and the long barrel of a Colt at the door of his hotel room, and he wondered just who had sent that second man to the *Congress*. He'd had no doubt that it was a Combine scheme. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Mr. Crandall," Blaze murmured, "that sounds almost like a threat."

"Wise men," said Asa Crandall, and that smile was still on his lips, "have been known to let sleeping dogs lie, Captain Carvel. And now may I bid you good evening?"

Blaze thought it best to play along with Crandall, he forced his shoulders to slump dejectedly. "You may," he mumbled. "I guess you're right, Mr. Crandall, now you put it that way."

Approval gleamed in Asa Crandall's pale eyes. "That's the way to talk," he beamed. "That's the way to talk! Mr. Goodwin," he called to the clerk in the outer office, "you will prepare the bonus money for Captain Carvel I mentioned. It will serve to see you through, captain," he explained, "until you find another ship."

"I'm sure it will," Blaze said, and he turned with his head ducked, so Mr. Crandall could not see the expression that had crossed his face.

He took the gold Mr. Goodwin gave him. Five hundred in pay, and another five hundred bonus. "The bonus," he thought, "will hire me two good men to watch these offices, and Mr. Asa Crandall—"

AS HE packed up his bags, Blaze told Hez tersely of his meeting with Crandall, and of the bonus money. "Crandall wants the *Lass* to stay where she is," he concluded, "and I'm right curious to find out why. We've got to work fast and quietly, or—"

"Or get our haids blowed off," Hez Brown grunted. "I'll find ye the boys in the mornin' to keep an eye on Mr. Crandall. Loyal members of the *Lass's* crew. Meantime," he looked about Carvel's rooms, "we've got to find a place to stay."

Blaze studied his old pilot, and for the first time since screaming metal had shattered the *Lovely Lass*, he smiled naturally. "Why, Hez," he said laconically, "didn't Miss Mary-Lou McGinnis tell us her mother runs a boarding house on Kearney Street?"

A delighted grin quirked Hez Brown's mustache. "Why that she did, cap'n."

Mary-Lou McGinnis was the one who opened the door to them, and she was as tall and lovely as Blaze remembered her. The gas lights showed a surprised blush stain her cheeks as he bowed.

"Ma'am," he murmured, "do you suppose your mother could put up a pair of homeless wayfarers? We do not eat with our knives, and we do not drink coffee from our saucers. In a word, two gentlemen."

"I'm sure you are," the girl said, and Blaze found her smile something to remember. It was pleasant to forget death and danger for awhile. The morning would be soon enough to think again of the dangerous road ahead.

THE MORNING and the rest of the week that followed was full of important details for Captain Blaze Carvel. At the end of it, he invited Mary-Lou and Hez Brown to be his guests at the *Palace*. Perhaps it was the champagne that had put the glow in Mary-Lou's eyes, or perhaps it was just plain excitement, but Blaze knew he'd never seen a prettier girl.

"Folks," he spoke over the rim of his glass, "here's to the *Lass,* and her new owner."

"Who?"

Blaze grinned. "Me."

"You?" Hez Brown's blue eyes started to pop. "Glory be! Ye mean you bought the *Lovely Lass?"*

Blaze nodded, enjoying their surprise, and then his broad face sobered. "Aye," he said quietly, and like a man laying cards on the table he tapped out with his fingers the history of what he had accomplished.

"First," he said, "the Atlas Assurance Company agent was more than glad to get the *Lass* off his hands. I paid him twenty thousand for her."

"But ye ain't got that much money to your name!" Hez Brown exploded.

"The Union Bank had more than that for me," Blaze drawled. "I convinced them that I needed fifty thousand, and I gave the *Lass* for security. It seems," he confided, "that the Union has no love for the Northrup & Williams Combine. They believe that the growth of our state depends upon competition, not the localization of huge fortunes in the hands of a few men. It will be up to us to prove them right."

"Glory be!" Brown repeated. "We'll get a look at them boilers yet. One-twenty-five —or fight! Cap'n, our friend, Mr. Crandall will likely bust his own boilers when the word of what ye've done leaks out!"

And that night in the quiet hall of her mother's boarding house, Mary-Lou McGinnis watched Hez Brown skip agilely upstairs and out of sight then she turned and her hands rose to the lapels of Carvel's jacket. Blaze held himself stiffly. He wanted to put his arms around this girl, he wanted to hold her close to him, but a man ready to travel danger's highroad had no right to even dream.

She looked up into his black eyes for a long moment without speaking. Then she murmured, "I will be ready to sail with you on the *Lass* whenever you say the word." She was on tiptoe now, and Blaze felt her lips touch his for one brief instant, then she was turning in a flurry of silk and white petticoats, and running along the lower hall.

Blaze watched her disappear into the kitchen, then he reached to unbutton his jacket. The air seemed stifling, but his feet were light as he climbed the stairs to join his pilot.

They boarded the salvage vessel the next morning and slipped quietly into the harbor just as the dawn sun was driving the fog high into the pines on Yuerba Buena Island.

Some of the crew were Kanakas, some Chinese. The mate was a brawny redhead with a wicked tongue in his head, and the owner-captain of the *Ugly Duck* was big Brant Devlin who'd pulled more than one river steamer off a mud-bank or towed her to port when a snag had ripped her bottom. Blaze had known Devlin for years, but he'd never set eyes on the *Ugly Duck's* mate before.

"Who is the redhead?" he asked Devlin when they had a minute alone.

Devlin's brows lifted in some surprise. "Why damnation, I figured you'd know him. He come to me with a recommend from your old boss, Crandall, and I figured he'd be a good man to have along. Claimed he'd helped put the engines in the *Lass,* and I figured his knowledge might come in handy."

Blaze kept his face expressionless, but warning bells were ringing inside his head. "He might of at that," he said in tones that he contrived to make careless.

"Shark Carney, he calls hisself," Devlin

wiped a hand along his greasy pants, "and he's took hold like a good hand."

"*Bueno,*" Blaze murmured, and he turned away to find Brown who was chatting with the helmsman as the *Ugly Duck* nosed into San Pablo Bay heading for Carquinez Strait, and the Delta beyond.

"Keep an eye on the redhead," he said quietly. "Crandall put him aboard."

Hez Brown cursed, and spat to windward. "Which means everything you've been doin' is known to them. So help me I'll slip a dirk 'tween that bucko's ribs and throw him to the catfish the first time he blinks the wrong eye! They's some others aboard I don't like the look of either."

"We'll see," Blaze murmured, "we'll see."

CHAPTER FOUR

Let the Dead Stay Buried!

THEY found out sooner than they expected. A hawser snapped the next morning as they swung a pump aboard the *Lovely Lass,* and whipped back across the *Ugly Duck* with the shrill whine of death in its voice. A brown head lay almost at Blaze Carvel's feet when the hawser hung once more limp and straight. Blaze looked down into the Kanaka's sightless eyes, and he heard only dimly the cries and curses of the salvage crew. That cable could have decapitated him or Hez Brown as easily as the Kanaka. Even here death stalked.

The work went on, but a crew once happy had turned sullen. With Devlin beside him they directed operations that day, and watched the *Lass* slowly lift as the weight of water left her hold.

"She'll be riding clear quicker'n I'd have believed," Devlin said that evening over an after supper pipe, "and it'll come none too soon for me, Cap'n. I don't like the way the crew is actin'. There's some startin' to call your *Lovely Lass* a ship of doom. A death craft that'll kill all those who set foot aboard her."

Blaze rose from the captain's table and his face was grim. "Who is spreading that talk, Devlin?" he asked bluntly. "It ain't you, and it ain't us."

"I've seen Carney, confabin' with some of the crew," Devlin admitted reluctantly. "He gets along fine with them Kanakas, talks their lingo."

Blaze felt the weight of the Colt in a shoulder holster beneath his jacket. He had taken the weapon from his sea-bag that morning. "Maybe," he murmured, "I'll mosey for'ard and have a talk with Carney."

Quietly he dodged through the clutter of gear that covered the deck, and as he passed the forward cabin where the crew had quarters, Blaze saw light wink from a point a half mile upstream. Once twice it blinked, and then in the bow of the *Ugly Duck* he saw a hooded lantern blinking back an answer.

There was mutiny brewing below decks, and hell afoot on the river. Blaze felt his long legs punch him forward into a run and all the volcanic anger he'd suppressed since the *Lass* had gone down boiled up in him.

His foot smashed against a coil of rope, and he stumbled as the man in the bow turned. By the lantern's light, Blaze saw Shark Carney's red face and hair and then the lantern came at his head. The stumble saved him, for he felt the heavy object

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pass just above his cap. It struck with a crash somewhere behind him, and the light died just as Carney's fist jarred against his jaw.

The blow straightened Blaze, brought dancing lights before his eyes, then his own fists were moving like pistons in and out against the other man's body.

"Keep comin', Carney," he invited. "This is the kind of a fight I like!"

But it was not the kind Carney liked. He turned, and Blaze saw his body arch over the bow. The man's swimming head roused a path of brilliance in the river, and Blaze drew his colt then let the weapon sag. Enough men had died already along the Sacramento. Killing Carney, even if he could hit the man, would gain nothing. That winking light on the point had been enought to show him that every move they'd made to raise the *Lovely Lass* had been watched. There was nothing Carney could tell the Combine that they didn't already know. Unless it was something connected with his insidious talk that the *Lass* was a ship of doom, and that the crew would soon mutiny.

On the thought, Blaze swung around and he was glad that the revolver was still in his hand. The crew had heard the fight and they were out of their quarters and facing him, brown and yellow men, naked to the waist."

"Rig lights," he snapped. "Get the pumps going. What in the name of Hell do you think this is? Get busy. I'll shoot the first man that refuses to work! The man who was bringing death to you has gone over-side. Now get busy!"

Blaze cast a glance at the *Lovely Lass,* her white sides shining in the dim star-light, and there seemed to be a strange waiting sense about her as though she knew that this was just one chapter in her career, that there were more to come before she sailed the Sacramento again as the proud Queen of the Rivers.

THEY worked that night and all the next day. The Chinese cook kept coffee laced with rum coming on deck to keep men awake. Eyes red-rimmed, Blaze watched the *Lass* stir sluggishly against ropes that moored her to the tree-lined shore and he said at last to Devlin and Hez Brown:

"We'll get our look at her boilers tomorrow. Now its time we all got some sleep. Tell your crew to knock off Devlin. They deserve a rest!"

Drugged sleep claimed Blaze, but it was still not enough to quiet his mind completely. In his cabin he heard the pulse of motors in the night, the roar of boilers fired to forced draft, and he was swinging his feet to the deck when the *Ugly Duck* heeled. Arms in front of him, he struck his pilot and both of them fell in a tangle of blankets.

"What in thunderation—?" Hez Brown spluttered.

"We've been rammed!" Blaze snapped, and his arm swept to the head of his bunk to bring his blue Colt from holster leather. "Knock out the *Duck* and the *Lass* sinks again. Her timbers won't stand a second try—" He was heading for the deck almost as he finished speaking, and faint starlight showed the trailing sparks from a tall steamer stack disappearing downstream.

A laugh that had the ironic overtones of a coyote's wail came drifting back across the water, and feet wide-spread Blaze fired toward the dim shape he could see leaning over the aft rail. It was blind shooting at best, a show of defiance and little else and yet Blaze saw the shape on that fast-fading steamer straighten and he heard the man's laughter change to a surprised curse as he leaped back out of sight.

"Yuh hit him!" Hez Brown was leaping up and down in his bare feet like a puppet pulled by strings. "Tagged him, and if it warn't Gem Hawks you can turn that gun on me! I'd recognize that cusses laugh anywhere."

"You can't hail a man's laugh into court," Blaze said grimly.

Devlin and all the crew were hitting the deck now, and a glance past them was enough to show Blaze that little damage had been done. The steamer had struck them only a glancing blow, splintering a section of the rail and deck. His eyes skipped Captain Devlin, and touched the brown men grouped behind him. Their eyes showed white in the starlight, and Blaze knew that this was the moment to gain their allegiance or lose it forever.

"The *Lovely Lass,*" he told them almost gently, "is no ship of doom. You have just seen the proof. Evil men, not spirits, are

trying to sink her and us. Do you see it?"

A big Kanaka stepped forward. "White devils doom ship. Not spirits. We work for you good."

"And right now," Blaze said. "We will sleep when we are old!"

The Kanaka seemed to think that was a good joke. He laughed. So did the other brown and yellow men, their heads nodding cheerfully.

"Well I'll be damned," Devlin watched the crew set about rigging lanterns, and he listened to their excited jabber. "Looks like Gem Hawks has gone and done us a favor. Hell, I was half expecting all them Kanucks to go over-side afore mornin', Now—"

"Now," Blaze said again, and the lines had deepened on his black-stubbled face, "we're keeping at this job until she's finished!"

In muck to their knees they found all a man could ask the next afternoon in the engine room where dead men floated against the bulkheads, silent accusers of the hands that had riveted one thin plate in the boilers.

Blaze held a twisted square of the metal in fists that shook with helpless fury. "Thin as a felt hat!" he rumbled. "Take a look for yourselves. Once set this plate looked like any of the rest. Only the man who placed it would know the difference. It couldn't have been accidental."

Hez Brown took the boiler plate in his gnarled hands. "Carney," he said huskily. "Shark Carney. He told Devlin here that he helped install these boilers. And now we find this."

"He'll pay, Captain," Devlin growled. "By Heaven he will. We'll hand this over to the sheriff when we get back to town, and—"

"And prove nothing," Blaze said grimly. "Carney aint the only man who helped install these boilers. You can't arrest him any more than you can jail the whelps who paid him to slip this plate into the *Lass*. We've got to have proof and I'm damned if I can make up my mind yet where to lay the blame. Crandall didn't want the *Lass* raised, and a Combine steamer rams us. You figure it out."

"By Heaven we'll hit on the answers afore we're done!" Hez Brown said in tones full with anger.

Blaze looked at his pilot, and again his eyes were black coals sunk in his head. "If we have to sail the Lass halfway to Hell to do it!" he agreed.

IT WAS mid-afternoon of the next day when the *Ugly Duck* towed the listing *Lass* around the point of Yuerba Buena Island and came within sight of Embarcadero wharves and ship-wright yards along the bay shore.

And like gulls sweeping to a feast on the carcass of a dead whale, a swarm of small boats darted out across the blue waters toward them. Steam launches and sailing craft laden with people. And the day was clear enough so that even from this distance they could see the dark line of crowds lining the docks.

Hez Brown peered through the pilot house windows of the fire-scorched *Lass* surprise on his face and in his voice. "Glory be, and I never expected to see us git this kind of reception," he muttered. "Some of the steamers passing us on the way down-river musta spread word of our coming. I knew folks wouldn't forget the *Lass*."

Blaze nodded, and then his lips tightened for the faces they could see in one of the first launches to reach them looked anything but friendly. He saw a speaking trumpet rise in one man's hands, and words they hadn't expected came rolling across the water to them.

"So Cap Doom is bringin' home a ghost ship! Hell, couldn't yuh even let the dead rest in peace?"

There was more talk in the same vein, and other small boats crowding around the wallowing *Lass* were adding their own strident opinions of a captain who couldn't let the dead stay buried.

Blaze found his fists clenching in helpless anger. Someone had started this malicious talk—someone interested in driving Captain Carvel from the river.

"Maybe," he told Brown grimly, "we'd have been better off if folks had forgotten the *Lass!*"

On the docks they faced the same reception. Once there'd been cheers for Captain Carvel whenever a craft carrying his flag nosed into Embarcadero wharves. Once he'd been the most popular skipper on the river. Now there were even women in the crowd screaming at him.

"Killer!" he heard the word through a roaring in his head. "Not fit to pilot a mud scow."

"The dead will rise and strike him down," came a voice from another quarter.

Pelting rocks could have hit him no harder. A whip-lash could have cut no more than the mean talk.

"Pay the fools no heed," Hez Brown cautioned softly. "T'is nothing but gabble that will soon be forgotten."

Blaze shook his head slightly, and climbed into a closed carriage waiting for passengers. He leaned back against the cushions and a vision of Asa Crandall's smooth round face came before his eyes. Words the man had spoken when he had first suggested raising the *Lass* came back to him.

"The public would call her a ship of doom," Crandall had said. "We would have no passengers— Let the dead stay buried, captain."

"There is a strong similarity," he said half to himself, "between the talk we've just been hearing, and some of the ideas Crandall expressed when I suggested raising the *Lass*."

Brown's lips sagged. "You mean he's been coachin' that crowd?"

Blaze shrugged. "One rotten apple will spoil a whole box if you leave it there. But pick it out, and the rest'll stay sweet a long time."

"I think I git what you mean," Hez growled. "Yes sir, cap'n, I think I do. Right now I got a powerful urge to hear what the two lads we picked to watch Mr. Crandall have got to say. A right powerful urge, by gum!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Messengers of Death

MARY-LOU was again handy to open the door for them when they reached her mother's boarding house. It seemed almost as though she'd been watching for them. Blaze scanned her face as they stepped into the hall, and he could read horror in her usually calm gray eyes. He had never seen her like this before.

Her hands reached out to take his arm, and there was urgency in her voice. "Blaze, Blaze," she cried, "hurry. We saw you approaching shore and I've been praying you'd come quick. Those boys from the *Lass*—"

She seemed unable to go on and Blaze felt himself stiffen. "They ran into trouble?"

Mary-Lou was dragging him along the hall to her own downstairs bedroom. "Jack Thomas," she named one of the crew-men they'd left to watch Crandall and Company offices, "is dead. Murdered. The other boy, Chet Ullery, made it back here. I found him this morning crumpled against the front door, unconscious, with a knife driven half through his back. I did what I could, got a doctor, but he doesn't hold out much hope for him. I—I don't either. He's dying, Blaze!"

And as he crossed the threshold of the dusky bedroom, Blaze Carvel was remembering a cabin on the *Lass* where an engineer had stubbornly clung to life until he could mutter the steam pressure exploding boilers had held. That word, and a ragged bit of boiler-plate no thicker than a felt hat would be scraps of evidence that would someday help hang a man, but it was evidence gained at a terrific price.

"Chet," he knelt beside the bed across from the door and the boy's young face reminded him of how he had once looked himself when he'd stepped on California sod for the first time.

Ullery's hair was tousled. Pain sweat beaded his forehead, but he managed a wan smile at sight of his skipper. "Lo, Cap'n," he whispered. "Glad you got here. Been waitin' to tell you somethin'. Don't ask me what it means. Jack knew the answer, but he's dead, and I ain't far from it. He met me last night in that alley across the street from Crandall's, and somebody musta trailed him. They jumped us in the dark with clubs and knives. Figgered they'd finished us both, I guess. Jack lived just long enough to give me a name. I dunno where he'd been. Dunno where he picked it up."

"Yes—" Blaze kept his hand on the boy's arm.

"He kept mutterin' as the life ran out of him. Sayin' Penn. Jake Penn, over and over again."

"Jake Penn," Blaze said slowly. He knew that he'd never heard the name before and he felt despair for the first time. Like a

man patiently scaling one wall only to find a higher one beyond. *"Jake Penn,"* he said again. "Hez, remember that."

"As if I'd be likely to forgit it!" Brown snapped. "Jake Penn, eh? By Glory we'll find that hombre if we have to tear this town apart to do it!"

And that was almost what the old pilot did, during all of the next week, but at the end he had to admit no progress.

"Nary a sign of the cuss," he reported to Carvel and Mary-Lou as they met in the McGinnis parlor the next Sunday evening. It was the first time Blaze had been back to the lodging house since the day Chet Ullery had died. He'd shifted his sea-bag to the bunk-room behind the *Eagle* Ship-wright office, and every waking hour had been spent supervising repairs to the *Lass*. Now he listened to his pilot's report with a shaking head.

"I've hit every deadfall from the Plaza to the waterfront," Brown said, "but I ain't heard a single mention of airy man named Jake Penn. It's got me stumped, cap'n."

Blaze clipped the tip from a Havana and applied a match. The light showed his face thinned and old. "This will have you stumped too," he said mirthlessly and from the pocket of his jacket he drew a copy of *The Call*. "I picked this up," he told them, "on my way up from the docks. Things are going slow there, too. If somebody ain't losin' an engine part over-side, they're squabblin' amongst themselves, or howling for more pay. I doubled salaries to start with. I've doubled 'em again, and if the *Lass* ain't shipshape and ready to sail inside of thirty days, there won't be a dollar left in the bank to buy coal for her new boilers. And if we don't stop letters like the one in this rag," he tapped the paper, "we'll never get a passenger to set foot on the *Lass* after she is ready for service."

"What is it, Blaze?" Mary-Lou asked.

Blaze opened the paper. He read the letter without comment.

> REMEMBER THE *LOVELY LASS?*
>
> There will be many who remember that ship, so-called the Queen of the Rivers. Many who will remember her with sorrow and horror in their hearts. Relatives of those who died in the holocaust, and other men and women who lost sweethearts and friends.
>
> They will not forget the *Lass*, or the captain who ordered full speed ahead from untried boilers—

"That's a lie!" Hez Brown yelled. "Damnit, cap'n—"

"Let me finish," Blaze said quietly.

> Nor will those bereaved ones forget that the same skipper will be master of that doom ship when once more she is ready to take the water.
>
> There will be no three hundred fighting this time for tickets to fill her sumptuous cabins. No, there will be but three ghostly passengers to tread her bloody decks.
>
> DEATH, DESTRUCTION, and DESOLATION!

Out of the silence that followed his reading, Mary-Lou's voise sounded startlingly loud. "Oh, Blaze," she cried, "that is dastardly! We've got to find the man who wrote that letter. Make him retract every word. If people aren't allowed to forget the past you, you—"

"Will be whipped before we start," Blaze finished. "First off, whatever team we're fighting didn't want us to raise the *Lass*. Now that we have, they're trying this scheme as a follow-up to the reception that waited us when we hit port. This is their second try to drive us off the river."

"And why they ain't made another try at killin' ye," Hez Brown said slowly. "Hell, they don't need to waste bullets when words will turn the trick."

"Only this time," Blaze murmured, "I think they've pressed their luck too far. *The Call* demands the name of letter writers who appear in this *Forum Column*, and I'm going to pry it out of them with a gun if it comes to that."

Carriage wheels halted out in front of the house, and Blaze rose to his feet. "That hack has come to take me to *The Call*. When I come back from there you and I are going to take up where Thomas and Ullery left off, Hez."

"They died—" Mary-Lou McGinnis said through stiff lips.

"We won't!" Hez Brown snapped.

THE night editor of *The Call*, Blaze had ascertained that afternoon was the man who handled *The Forum*. In twenty minutes he was seated across from Hank Files giving him the grim history of the *Lass*. When he was finished he spread his hands.

"There's your story," he said simply. "You can't print it. I can't prove it. But mebbe I'll be on my way to pinning down the responsible people if you can give me the name of the man who sent you this letter."

A big, florid man, Hank Files face was red with excitement as he answered Blaze. "Carvel," he said, "I've heard some fancy yarns in my time, but yours tops most of 'em. Its just fanciful enough to be true. I'll give you the name you want if you give me your word to let *The Call* have first crack at your story when she breaks."

"That's a deal," Blaze said, and his big knuckles were white as he stood up. "And I'll make you another promise," he added grimly. "You won't have long to wait."

"You mentioned the name yourself not many minutes ago," Files drawled. "Jake Penn is the one you'll be wanting."

"Penn!" Blaze blinked. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"His office is near the foot of Market Street, in the Mercantile Mart. He calls himself a lawyer. I call him a mountebank. Watch your purse and watch your back when you visit him!"

On the chance that the shyster lawyer might still be in his office, Blaze had his driver take him down to the Mart, but all of the big building was dark.

"Home," he called forward, "and don't spare the horses."

A strange hack was parked in front of the boarding house, and lights were still glowing in the parlor, Blaze saw as his driver reined to a halt. Through the white curtains that covered the front windows he could see three shadows in the room.

"Mosey up to the end of the block and wait," Blaze said softly. "I may be needing you again."

"Aye, sir," the driver nodded.

Blaze moved inside without knocking, and his light steps carried him through the double parlor doors. A small stranger was facing him with his narrow back to the glowing Franklin stove. His face was coyote thin, smooth shaven. Hez Brown was gnawing at a corner of his ragged mustache, trying to appear calm, and the stiffness of Mary-Lou betrayed her excitement.

"Captain Carvel," she said formally, "this is Mr. Jacob Penn."

Blaze bowed slightly. "Mr. Penn," he acknowledged, and his voice was smooth as the tones coming from a large base viol.

"Captain," the little man said, "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. I hope you and your friends will pardon my calling at this late hour, but the need was urgent. If I could see you alone—"

"We have no secrets in this house, Mr. Penn," Blaze said calmly.

The lawyer shrugged. "Your pleasure," he agreed. "Having no other choice, I'll come right to the point, sir. A firm I represent has requested me to offer you forty thousand dollars for the *Lovely Lass*. That sum will, I believe, reimburse you for the expenses you have already incurred, and will, ah, relieve you of embarrassment—"

Blaze felt his chest strain against the whiteness of his shirt. "Why, Mr. Penn," he drawled, "you bring me hope. Hope, sir," and the words had double meaning. "We realized our error once the *Lass* came within sight of these shores," he went on smoothly. "Our reception was not friendly. And that letter in *The Call* this evening. Frankly, sir, it was the extra chip to sink our bark of faith. I am afraid no one will sail on the *Lass* as long as I am her skipper."

Jacob Penn's face was beaming. He looked like a man gaining something he'd never expected, and Hez Brown and Mary-Lou looked like two people who couldn't believe their ears.

"You're right, Captain," Penn seemed to have trouble keeping the exultation from his voice. "My office is in the Mercantile Mart. You know it? Good. I will have the papers and the cash ready in the morning. Now I must take my leave—"

He moved toward the door like a homing pigeon on the last lap of a long journey, and Blaze watched him, thinking that perhaps he, too, would soon see the end of a trail that had started on a river far away.

A horse's hooves sounded out front, and he was swinging toward the door when Brown caught him on one side, and Mary-Lou on the other. "Boy, boy," Hez was yelling, "have you gone and lost your wits? What in damnation ye up to? That was the whelp Jack Thomas named, and ye let him get away—"

"That," Blaze said with his thin smile, "is also the gentleman who published a letter in *The Call*. Now get your hands off me, mister. He's gone to report his good

fortune to the lads who sent him, and I've got a hack waiting to follow him. We'll know just who we're up against inside of an hour, or I miss my guess. Wait here for me."

"Wait, hell!" Brown's voice was shrill. "We're comin' with ye. You ain't goin' to hog all the sport, cap'n. Damned if ye are!"

CHAPTER SIX

A Toast to Satan

THERE was no time to argue. They ran to the hack up the block. "Follow that cab," Blaze snapped. "There'll be an extra doubloon in it for you, if you can do it without them spotting us."

"For that kind of money I could follow my grandmother's ghost. Climb in, friends. 'Pears to me that other outfit is headin' for Nob Hill."

Blaze felt Mary-Lou's hand slip into his own, and the girl's fingers were cold. "Where will it end, Blaze?" she whispered.

"Maybe we'll soon see," he told her softly, and gestured ahead up the hill they were climbing. A huge mansion set in spacious gardens seemed to hang in space almost above them. "Crandall's," Blaze said, and stepped from the climbing hack before either of them could protest. "I'll be back," he murmured, and darkness closed about him.

Cutting up through the gardens, he saw Jake Penn's cab draw in beneath the covered arch that ran out across the drive. Crouched in shrubbery he watched Penn run up the steps, saw the front door open for him, then he was moving forward again toward tall narrow windows that he knew from visits of his own looked in on the dining room. Many the time he was there.

Quiet as a prowling cat, he crossed the pale strip of the drive, slipped through more shrubbery until he was against the house just below the windows. A ribbon of light flowed down over him from between thick drapes not completely drawn across the glass. Slowly Blaze lifted himself erect. Six feet and over he still had to stand on tip-toe to peer inside, and what he saw was enough to make him forget the discomfort of strained muscles.

Four men were seated at the table, and the shabbily dressed lawyer was standing to one side his long, thin fingers nervously tugging at his watch chain. But it was not Jake Penn that held Blaze Carvel's attention. The four seated men explained a great many unsolved things to Blaze.

Asa Crandall was at the head, facing the window. On his right sat Gem Hawks, elegant in formal black. The darkness of his clothes accentuated the white bandage covering his right hand. Blaze wondered if the bullet he'd fired that night on the river was the wound Hawks was covering. It would be something worth knowing, and then he switched his attention to the pair on Crandall's left. The rulers of the Combine.

Northrup and Williams. Big men, both of them, their faces were florid from years of easy living, and the arrogance that power and riches bring a man.

Champagne and cigars! Blaze saw Crandall lift the tall glass at his elbow. "Gentlemen," he exclaimed. "it is good news Mr. Penn brings us. Captain Carvel seems to have at last seen the error of his ways—"

The Combine had taken a new partner, Blaze realized. Or else Crandall had secretly been one of the firm all along and had

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ballyhooed his intention to run them off the river as a means of interesting stockholders, the Combine realizing they could never do it under their own name. And with the *Lass* on the bottom men who had spent their savings on her would have no recourse other than to ship their crops and produce in the holds of Combine steamers. No wonder they'd done their damndest to see that the *Lass* stayed on the bottom and failing that had tried intimidation to keep her from ever returning to the Sacramento with an independent skipper aboard.

Now Penn had convinced them that the *Lass* was about to fall into their hands for the final time. It would be a nice story to lay in the lap of Sheriff Bradstreet. Then a thought struck Blaze with grim finality. The sheriff would laugh at him. There were no witnesses to corrorborate the conversation he was hearing. The word of Northrup & Williams would carry far more weight with a court than the voice of Captain Doom!

BARD WILLIAMS was staring into his glass. "I would feel more secure," he said broodingly, "if we knew how much Carvel learned from the boilers of the *Lovely Lass*. That fool, Carney, overplayed his hand or he'd have been there to see for himself."

"That's why we were forced to try ramming," Hawks cool voice murmured, "and the Devil's own luck put me in the way of Carvel lead. If this hand doesn't heal it will hang me yet."

Northrup chuckled. "Gentlemen," he said, "Captain Carvel will never live to either bother us, or spend the forty thousaid Mr. Penn will hand him in the morning. Carney will see to that. Robbery will of course be the motive for murder. We will take care of him as we did the footpads he set to watch us. Then we will re-name the *Lass*—"

Shrubbery rustled dryly behind Blaze, and he dropped and tried to whirl but the swinging length of a club caught him solidly across the shoulder and the right side of his neck knocking him sidewise off balance. As he struck, he heard a man grunt.

"Kick his teeth out, Shark. You've been wantin' the chance!"

Two of them were coming at him through the darkness. Blaze made out their dim shapes, then they were jumping him with booted feet. A heavy toe grazed his head, set red lights before his eyes. One shoulder and arm was helpless. He rolled and made it to his knees, and the club smashed him down again. Blaze tasted his own blood, and he knew that if the club caught him squarely he'd be a dead man and strength seemed to come to lift him to his feet with one of the men clinging to his back. He ducked and heaved and the man's length levelled a rushing Carney. Staggering, bleeding, half-blind, Blaze made for the open drive. Dimly he heard the quick thunder of a horse's hooves, and a voice crying:

"Blaze, Blaze. We're coming—"

Hell-bent for perdition, the carriage he'd hired came sweeping past the house as the front door was flung open. A gun flamed from the doorway, and Blaze heard the solid impact of lead hitting the hack as Mary-Lou's strong young arms reached to help him inside. Hez Brown had swept aside the side curtains and his yell was angry as a hungry cougars.

"If its bullets ye want to swap," he howled, "why let me in on the game." His old cap-and-ball Colt spewed flame and lead, then Blaze found himself on the floorboards of the cab, and the driver's whip was singing out across the back of his horse.

"Mary," he whispered, and the girl's name tasted sweet through the blood in his mouth.

IT WAS Blaze Carvel's last conscious word for ten full days, and when he finally opened his eyes he found himself in Mary-Lou's own bedroom.

The girl was there beside his bed. Her own face had thinned. There were lines in it he'd never seen before, and something told Blaze that she'd spent most of her waking hours and probably many of her sleeping ones in that chair beside him. She was dozing as he looked at her, but the faint movement of his head brought her fully awake.

"Blaze," she whispered his name. "Oh, thank God! Doctor Hubbard thought you might never regain consciousness."

"A hell of a tough captain I turned out to be." Blaze managed a weak grin.

"Only a tough one would have lasted this

long," Mary-Lou answered. "Concussion, fractured shoulder, torn ligaments in your neck. Three broken ribs, possible internal injuries. I guess you're tough enough, mister, to cheat the Irish out of a good old-fashioned wake!"

As the day wore on, and he was able to take food Mary-Lou told him what she and Hez Brown had accomplished. "The *Lass* will be ready for the river inside another week or ten days, a more beautiful craft," her eyes glistened with sudden tears, "than she ever was before."

But there was more she hadn't told him Blaze could sense, and then the ample form of Mrs. McGinnis blocked the hall door. "If ye be feelin' up to it, Mister Carvel," she beamed, "I'll show in a visitor most powerful anxious to see ye."

"A visitor?" Blaze scrubbed at the mop of ten days beard covering his cheeks. "Maybe you'd better bring me a razor first."

"This 'un" Mrs. McGinnis said succintly, "has seen 'em lookin' worse than you, cap'n. Come in, sheriff. The sapleen wants a barber, but I think he'll take ye for a substitute!"

"Bradstreet," Blaze muttered, and his black eyes turned to Mary-Lou. "So this is what you've been holding back," he accused.

"Not from me," Sheriff Cliff Bradstreet boomed. He came in with a wide, Irish grin on his homely face, and his hand reached down to grip Carvel's. "Captain, t'is glad I am to see ye with your eyes open. This colleen has spent a heap of time worryin'. And I might add t'is a good thing for you that she's a nurse. They make mighty fine wives for fighting skippers." Then the grin left his face. "But I ain't here to do the talkin'. I'm told that you come out second best in that little fracas on the Hill. However the courts, ye realize, ain't as open minded as me. So what have ye got to suggest?"

They had found an unexpected ally, but one whose hands were shackled by the stern duties of his office. Blaze told the sheriff all that he knew, and all that he could prove.

"It mought be enough to arrest Carney and Gem Hawks," Bradstreet said doubtfully, "but I misdoubt if ye can get a conviction. And if my men picked them up it would sure and certain make the rest lay low. Ye don't want that, and neither do I. T'is the bigwigs we're after."

Blaze nodded in full agreement. "We've got to clear the river for the ships of honest skippers," he said slowly, "and the only way to do it is to see Northrup and Williams and Asa Crandall headed for Hangman's Hill!"

"Easy said, but hard done," the sheriff growled. "If ye've got a plan name it, and I'll side ye all the way."

Blaze looked up at the ceiling, and it was like a screen showing him many things. The Sacramento flowed there in eternal majesty and always would. Only the men who sailed her would change as they had since the coming of the first red man. The Sacramento was a highway that belonged to all the world, not a grasping few. A picture of the *Lovely Lass* on her first voyage up that wide river floated before his eyes. All gilt and white grace with music playing for the dancers on her saloon deck. Ghostly music now for he remembered the horror of mangled bodies following the explosion that had turned the *Lass* into a foundering hulk.

And now his ship was once more ready to sail the river. "It won't happen again—" Blaze muttered, and the sheriff and Mary-Lou remained silent realizing he was hardly aware of their presence.

"Gem Hawks," he said, still speaking half to himself, "will be the king-pin in any trouble to come. He was the skipper who tried to send the *Lass* to the bottom when we had her half-raised. There ain't a meaner man nor a craftier one on the whole river. Northrup, Williams, and Crandall will rely on him to see that the *Lass* never reaches Captain Sutter's Embarcadero again, for if she makes it once the curse will be broken—"

"Curse, hell!" the voice came from the hall doorway, and Hez Brown stood there grinning like a Cheshire cat, with the brawny shape of Hank Files looming behind him. Deep in his own thoughts, Blaze hadn't heard them enter the boarding house. His glowing black eyes studied them for a moment before he spoke.

"What are you meanin', Hez?" he asked finally.

The grizzled river pilot chuckled. "Hank brung me the word down to the dry-dock,"

he said, "and we come on along together to relay it on to you. Tell him, Hank."

A smile wreathed the night editor's red face. Well, while you've been sick," he said crisply, "I've taken it on myself to try and undo the harm Jake Penn done you with his poison pen letters in The Forum."

Blaze licked lips that had suddenly grown dry. "Go on," he said tersely.

Files nodded. "I've kept the public abreast of the progress Hez and his crew have been making on refurbishing the *Lass*. Your ship is news, Carvel, and so are you. Fact is I'd say you're quite a celebrity, and its paying dividends. People are forgetting the tragedy that struck the *Lass* on her maiden voyage. They're storming the ticket offices, and putting in reservations to ride the river on her second maiden trip. That's the good news we've brought you."

"We'll fill 'er from stern to forepeak!" Hez Brown said triumphantly. "With the *Lass* loaded, Northrup and his Combine won't be able to make airy move ag'in us!"

"That's where you're wrong," Blaze said, and his voice crackled with its old vigor. "Wrong as Hell! Maybe you're forgettin' what happened the first time. Boiler plate thin as a felt hat. A hundred men and women and kids dead on her decks. Human life don't mean a thing to that outfit, and *they'll try it again* because they know that if the *Lass* makes one run the curse will be broken, and their *Cormorant* about as valuable as a garbage scow because we'll have the passengers and freight. We're sailing the river all right, but outside of the crew and you and me, and the sheriff the passenger list will be filled with the names of the people who have already died on her decks."

"Voyage of the ghosts," Hank Files breathed. "Lord, what a story!"

Blaze turned eyes that had narrowed to slits on the editor. "Break that in your paper," he snapped. "Tell San Francisco the truth. Tell 'em there ain't a man jack of 'em going to step foot on the *Lass* until she's proved herself to be the Queen of the Rivers."

"I know one man," Hank Files half-whispered, "who's going to ride her."

Mary-Lou McGinnis drew a deep breath. "And one woman!" she murmured.

Blaze was paying them no attention. His eyes had turned on his pilot. "Get back down to the yards," he said harshly, "reinforce the bow with tie-beams. Sheathe her solid inside and out with boiler plate—"

Hez Brown's mouth had opened in surprise. "You plannin' on rammin' somebody—?" he began.

Blaze cut him short with a mirthless laugh, and his black eyes were hot. "I remember Gem Hawks ramming us once when the *Lass* was half afloat. There's many a place on the river where he might try it again. But this time I aim to be ready!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Voyage of the Ghosts

HANK FILES printed his story, and the news struck San Franciscans like a minor tidal wave. Never before had a queen of the rivers sailed without a passenger list.

"Everybody from the mayor on down to gutter-rats have been pestering me for a week," the editor told Blaze on the night before sailing. "Funny, but if you tell folks they can't have something, they'll bang on the doors of Hell to get it. And speaking of passage! Carvel—" he added.

Blaze grinned, and bit the end from a Havana, then his blocky face sobered. "The heart's not in me to refuse you, Hank. Meet us at the dock at dawn."

Files face had also sobered. "There's one bit of news a reporter of mine brought in awhile ago," he said quietly. "Northrup, Williams, and Crandall aren't in town. Neither is Gem Hawk, or any of his pug-uglies. Write your own ticket on that amigo."

Blaze studied the editor through eyes hard as bits of black lava. "The *Cormorant* is not in her berth, either!" he murmured.

Excited thousands were lining the Embarcadero when the *Lovely Lass* greeted the sun rising over Yuerba Buena Island with a fleck of white froth at her prow and a long, whistle blast that echoed over the bay like the call of a mighty trumpet speeding an army into battle. Faintly, from his place in the pilot house, Blaze heard a ragged cheer rise from the docks behind them, and he felt Mary-Lou standing close beside him slip her hand through his arm.

"They are proud of you, and your ship,

my captain," Mary-Lou said quite simply.

"And for what she stands for," Hez Brown agreed. "Folks won't be calling you Captain Doom after this trip!"

"No," Blaze said, and he was about to add, "If we make it," but he held the words, and the iron resolve that had carried him from disaster to this triumphant moment was still strong in him.

They coursed the bay, and passing small craft greeted the gleaming queen with waving hands and slatting sails. They wound through familiar Delta channels with Hez Brown's sure hands guiding the *Lass*.

Blaze paced the pilot house, peering through the gleaming windows that looked out over his ship. The pulse of the giant motors in the engine room was like the beat of his own heart, and he could feel a steady thrust of grim excitement building inside him. He'd sent Mary-Lou below decks to keep Hank Files and the sheriff company in the main salon. He did not want the girl's presence to distract him, and she had seemed to understand. She seemed to know, too, with sweet certainty, that he would have a question to ask her once they reached Captain Sutter's Embarcadero, but for now this great ship could be his only love.

"We're makin' time, Cap'n," Hez Brown said.

Blaze nodded tautly, and his eyes touched the green river banks flowing smoothly by on either side of them. The Sacramento was wide here, finding its way toward the bay in long, sweeping curves around which a man could peer, but it would narrow and flow more swiftly as they drew nearer Sacramento, and there the danger might be waiting for them.

The sun crawled over the forepeak and a Kanaka mess boy brought trays of hot food, but Blaze waved away everything but coffee, and in its dark depths he seemed to see Gem Hawks sardonic face grinning at him, then super imposing itself over the face, he saw the outlines of a narrow, hog-back island that split the river in twain. The channel on either side was called the Narrows. In flood time a steamer could pass on either side of it. But summer was nearing now. The Sacramento was shallow—

"Grant Island!" Blaze said, lifting his eyes to the river again.

"God in Heaven," Hez Brown growled behind him. Ye mean—"

"It's the finest spot on the river to ram a ship to her grave," Blaze grated, "and Gem Hawks is smart enough to know it. Ring the engine room, mister. . . . Tell 'em to break out the resin and hold it ready to use if we signal. Mebbe we won't need it, but if we do we'll want it in a hurry!"

"Aye," Hez Brown nodded soberly, and he lifted the brass speaking tube from its cradle near his hand.

THE SUN crawled westward, and shadows came out to speckle the green water. The *Lass* rounded a bend, plowed steadily down a mile-straight stretch of river, and Blaze leaned forward close to the pilot house glass, big hands knotted in his blue coat pocket, black eyes studying Grant Island lying at the head of the channel. It looked like a gigantic spear head flat in the center of the stream.

"There are snags close inshore on either side that'd rip the bottom out of a frigate," Hez Brown said behind him, and his voice was tense. "So we cain't hug the shore—"

Blaze hardly heard his pilot. A sharp bend lay just up-river beyond the island.

Ships of the Desert Helped Build Our West...

And ships of today are helping to build our future! Our merchant fleet today is the mightiest in the world—but men are still needed for training by the U. S. Maritime Service.

Help back the attack . . . . . by joining up—NOW!

Cloaked with giant scyamore and tall red willow a man could not see a ship lurking beyond that bend, but eyes watching from the trees could easily spot the *Lass* and signal a craft behind them.

Only a half mile lay between them and the island now. The channel looked narrower than Blaze had ever seen it before, and he could picture the snags lying sharp as dragon teeth not far below the surface. If his hunch was wrong, if the hand guiding the big ship veered her even a few feet from the center of the channel the snags would claim her for a prize. Inching through at low speed a captain might have a chance to reverse his engines if he felt his ship strike, but at full speed ahead—

Blaze drew a deep breath and spoke quietly. "Tell the black gang to pour on the resin, mister," he said without turning. "Full speed ahead!"

He heard Hez Brown gasp. "Mebbe they ain't waitin'—" he tried to protest.

"You've got your orders," Blaze snapped. "Give them!"

Almost instantly he felt the beat of the motors rise. Black smoke puffed up from the tall stack amidships, seemed to hang like a pall over the gleaming decks of the *Lovely Lass* as raw resin was fed into the fireboxes below. Blaze felt his ship tremble, then seem to leap forward.

And like a challenge, he saw another thick puff of smoke bloom suddenly above the trees beyond the Narrows. A black banner staining the sky.

"Glory be!" Hez Brown had seen it, too. "The whelps have been layin' up there with banked fires. Time they get up a head of steam and make it around the bend we'll be right in the middle like a cork pluggin' the hole."

The *"Cormorant,* and the *Lass,"* Blaze said musingly in his deep voice, and now that the danger was here in front of them at last he felt a certain hard calmness settle over him. "One of us will never sail the river again," he finished quietly.

He heard the pound of feet on the hurricane deck outside the pilot house, and swung his eyes briefly toward the door. His big red-headed mate, Mike Carthy, came through the door, and there was a wicked grin on his wide flat lips.

"I've ordered the crew to break out grapplin' hooks, Cap'n," he drawled. "Might be we'll have some use for 'em, and there's boys below decks that ain't forgot what that Combine done the fust time the *Lass* sailed this river. With your permission, sir, I'll see belayin' pins distributed."

Blaze felt the weight of the short Colt he was carrying in a shoulder holster beneath his own jacket. "You've got it, mister," he nodded, and his grin matched the mate's.

Mary-Lou McGinnis, the sheriff, and Hank Files brushed past the mate as he turned to leave. All of them saw the danger as they glanced at the smoke billowing above the trees ahead. The *Comorant's* prow nosed into view as the *Lass* entered the Narrows.

Blaze heard Hez Brown's laugh rise like a rusty cackle as he crouched behind the spokes of the gleaming wheel he loved. "We'll ram her and board," he chuckled. "We'll cut her in half like a rotten aig. Thank the Lord ye had the foresight to slap boiler plate along our prow, Cap'n."

Hank Files drew a deep breath. "And I thought horse racing was the king of sports!" he said half to himself.

No more than two hundred feet were separating the two ships now. Blaze slipped his arm around Mary-Lou, braced his thick legs. "Pray, if you can," he ordered simply. "One of us has got to give way. If we meet head-on we'll both founder. The one that rams has the best chance."

They were rushing closer now. Wind whined through the rigging like the voices of the dead crying out for retribution. Blaze tensed, measuring distances cooly. "Swing her, mister!" he said softly to Brown. "Hard a-port!"

He had caught Gem Hawks by a split second for already the man was turning to pass the same order to his helmsman. Through the gleaming glass of the *Cormorant's* pilot house windows, Blaze could see other men clustered behind the pilot.

"A fine crew they're carryin'," he heard Sheriff Bradstreet mutter. "Every last Combine bigwig is aboard her. T'is unhappy they'll be to see me aboard this craft."

Fifty feet now. The *Lovely Lass* shook herself like an angry lady as Hez Brown's hands spun the wheel. He was crooning like a man to his mistress. "Jest a little more, my darlin'. Ah, there we be. Steady as she goes now—"

GEM HAWKS pilot was swinging his ship desperately toward the shore, preferring grounding to being rammed, but his move was late. Woefully late. Blaze gripped Mary-Lou, and then the ships were together with an ugly rending of timber and the thin screams of men caught below decks in the Combine craft.

Staggering with the shock of the impact, Blaze released the girl. "Stay here," he said and there were sharp, hatchet-etched lines about his eyes and mouth. "We've got a little chore to finish, and it may not be pretty!"

He was out of the pilot house then, Colt in hand, and he heard the pound of feet behind him and the roaring cheers of his own crew as they grappled the ships together.

A single leap carried Blaze to the *Cormorant's* deck, and he heard the crash of pilot house glass as Gem Hawks fired through one of the windows at him. Blaze felt the breath of the bullet past his cheek, and grimly held his own fire. He wanted Hawks and all the rest of the Combine alive. A quick death was more than any of them deserved.

Colt flickering like the head of a Sierra diamondback, he crouched in the pilot house door, surveying the white-faced men cowering behind Gem Hawks rapier-lean shape.

"Don't any of the rest of you try and draw," he told them flatly. "I'd hate to waste lead on your guts. We'll let the Law handle that chore. "The Law," he added somberly, "and the dead! Yeah, you'll face the dead Asa Crandall, and you, Northrup, and you, Williams. All the ones who died when the *Lass* came up the river the first time. You'll see 'em outside your cell doors, and you'll see 'em when you climb the gallows on Hangman Hill. They'll pay you off a heap sight better than I can, and the river will be the cleaner for it. Clean and smooth for decent skippers—"

"*You* attacked us," Asa Crandall blustered. "I'll be the one to see you hang!"

"Oh, will you now?" said Sheriff Bradstreet. He had come up behind Blaze, and the fading sunlight was bright against the silver of the star pinned to his coat.

Blaze stepped back, and he felt suddenly anxious to return to the *Lovely Lass* and Mary-Lou. "Take over," he said quietly. "Its your party from here on in."

"And we'll make her a good one," the sheriff said gruffly.

Blaze nodded and he felt suddenly very tired, yet there was a queer exultation tugging at him, too. He felt like a man who has travelled a long road and reached his goal. A goal, and a prize that would last him forever. He lifted his eyes, and Mary-Lou was standing at the rail of the *Lovely Lass,* and even the packet was not as lovely as the smile on her lips. Blaze stepped toward her, reading a promise in her eyes that would last a lifetime.

THE END

VALLEY BEYOND THE LAW

When Scott Ragsdale, sole survivor of the Medicine Lodge Massacre, met that boot-tough little frontiersman, Frenchy Dufresne, they both decided to carve out a wilderness home from that wild and bloodstained land. . . . But how could even that vast range hold two such hair-trigger pardners, when each had sworn to be boss of a buckskin empire?

Read "Medicine Lodge Man-Breakers," a stirring epic of the pioneer West by Walt Coburn; also, "Blood of the Red Rim Rebels," by Ray Nafziger, and stories by Cox, Colohan, Van Cott, Roan and other top-hand Western writers.

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DESERT-RAT'S DEATH-WATCH

By CHARLES HAMMILL

Hackett swore violently as he bent over the fallen man.

AT THIS late hour the prison's cell block was quiet. The old man lay on his cot, breathing heavily, his once-big frame now shrunken and frail, and moonlight slanting down from the high barred window gave his skin a waxy cast. He turned his head slowly on the flat pillow, as if even that slight movement cost him a definite effort.

"Charley?"

"I'm right with you, Sam." Charley Hackett came out of the deeper shadows from where he had been silently watching, into the shaft of moonlight.

"You call the doc, Charley?" old Sam Gepler asked.

"I called him, Sam," Charley lied. He was no fool. If this night went the way he hoped, he would not want the doctor nursing life back into Gepler's wasted body.

Now that he had murdered his old cell mate, Charlie Hackett could almost feel the golden fortune that awaited him. . . . It would be as simple as falling off a bucking bronc to take the fabulous yellow nuggets from the loco old-timer, who thought them just so many "purty rocks."

"The guard said the doc was operating on some con, and can't come right away," Charley said. "How do you feel, Sam?"

"Not very good. My heart—"

"You'll pull through, Sam."

"No." The old man seemed certain of it. "When you get old as I am, you can tell when your time's up."

Charley Hackett bent forward, a tall man with angular features and shrewd gray eyes. He knew what was coming, but he let none of his eagerness show. You don't spend nearly five long years with a cell mate without learning some of his secrets. And Sam Gepler had talked in his sleep, often. . . .

The old man was murmuring in his thin, dry whisper, "You've been good to me, Charley, ever since they brought you here. Your stretch is about up, ain't it?"

"In another month."

The old man hesitated, as if trying to guard his secret to the last. But inside his chest was a fluttery weakness that was a final warning. And gold could be of no value to a man who would soon be in his grave.

"You've been good to me, Charley, and now I want to do something for you," Sam Gepler murmured. "Have you ever heard me talk in my sleep?"

Charley Hackett shook his head.

"That's funny," the old man breathed. "All the others before you told me I kept talking in my sleep about the gold. They even tried to force me to tell where I hid it."

Hackett thought savagely, *Damn him, why don't he get to the point!*

Aloud, he said, "I never heard you sleep-talk, Sam."

THE old man began telling it then, slowly, as though rationing his failing strength. "Forty years ago, I used to be an assayer, down in Goldfield, Nevada. You didn't know that, did you, Charley? Well, I was. Things were booming down there then, new mines opening up all around, with high-graders stealing ore worth from ten to a hundred dollars a pound.

"That's where me and a lot of other assayers came in, old Sam went on. "We bought ore from the high-graders at ten and fifteen cents on the assayed dollar. Most of them assayers cashed in, and lived high. But I didn't. I cached my ore where no one could find it—almost five hundred pounds of top grade stuff. If I hadn't been fool enough to get drunk and kill a man, I'd be sittin' pretty now."

Hackett said nothing. He waited, tense and impatient, fighting to keep his eagerness hidden from the old man's crafty eyes.

"But that ore is yours now, Charley, maybe a hundred thousand dollars worth." Did the old man's voice seem a little stronger, was color beginning to return to his waxy features? Strain pinched down on Charley Hackett's nerves. If Sam Gepler rallied at this late point, refused to tell the rest of his secret. . . .

"All you have to do," Gepler breathed, "is hunt up Crazy Ike Stevens, in Goldfield, and tell him I sent you. The ore is hidden—" But the old man didn't finish that.

Charley Hackett bent forward. "Where did you say?"

Uncertainty came into Sam Gepler's gaunt features, and he seemed to be searching himself for some clue to his doubtful future. He muttered, "I got a parole that's due any day now. If it comes through soon enough, if I can beat this bad heart of mine—"

"Where did you hide the ore, Sam?"

A slow and crafty smile warped Gepler's mouth, and now there was a definite color rising in his shrunken face.

"I ain't tellin', Charley, not yet anyhow. I got a hunch I'm goin' to pull through even if the doc don't get here. I'm feelin' better now, lots better."

Charley Hackett reached up and pulled the pillow down from his hanging bunk. Old Sam watched him, curious.

"What are you goin' to do with that pillow, Charley?"

"Put it over your face," Hackett said.

And he did. It didn't take as long as he would have expected. Panic struck the old man, and he struggled briefly, fighting for air that he couldn't get through the pillow close-pressed against his face. It was fear, as much as anything else, that stopped Sam Gepler's weak heart. He had been murdered, but there would be no evidence.

TWO mountain ranges and five hundred miles lay between Charley Hackett and the prison where he had spent his last five

years. Standing on the curb of Columbia Avenue, he surveyed Goldfield with a city man's critical interest. Little remained of the mining town's old glory. Fire and cloudbursts had shrunk the old boundaries, and the abandoning of worked-out mines had depleted the population to a few souls who stubbornly believed that the town would someday rise again out of its ashes.

It was a ghost town, and the little life remaining in it was thin and thready. Charley Hackett turned into a four-story brick structure whose weather-beaten sign read, "Goldfield Hotel". Its main lobby was spacious and airy, an imposing room of solid mahogany ond overstuffed leather. The clerk eyed Hackett from behind his desk with lazy interest.

"You want a room, stranger?"

"Just information," Hackett answered.

The clerk was an oldtimer with a broad, friendly grin. "You came to the right place to get it," he said. "I been in this town since it got its first britches. I knowed them all, miners and prospectors, gamblers and gospel preachers. Tex Rickard used to run a saloon here, ye know that? You a newspaper man? They get down here once in a while for a story."

Charley Hackett shook his head.

The oldtimer's interest stirred. "Minin' man, maybe? Some folks will tell ye this town is dead, but it ain't. Not by a long shot. She's just sort of restin'. Ask Sweeney, or Myers, or any of the old boys still hangin' on here. There's plenty gold buried here, just waitin' to be found."

Charley Hackett smiled faintly. "That's what I hear," he said. "Only I'm not a miner. I wouldn't know good ore if I saw it."

The old man showed his disappointment plainly. "Oh."

"I'm looking for a man named Stevens?"

"Stevens?" The oldtimer frowned, searching his memory. "I've knowed a lot of Stevens in my time. One was a back-east promoter, and there was one that ran a girl-house at the edge of town, only he was killed forty years ago in a gun fight. And there was a Stevens, I think that was his name, who used to be a sort of handy man for an assayer who called himself Sam Gepler."

Hackett said, "That's the man I'm lookin' for."

The oldster grunted drily. "All we ever called that Stevens was Crazy Ike. Yeah, he's still around here. Lives up around the old Salvation mine about five miles out of town, but we never see him down here more then a couple times a year. Crazy as a bull-bat, Ike is. He's worse than a packrat for pickin' up odds and ends when he's down here, and takin' them back to his place to hide."

The old man wanted to talk, but Charley Hackett was impatient. He asked how to get to the Salvation mine, and listened to the clerk's directions.

"You can't miss it," the man said. "Only kind of watch out while you're up there. Ike has always seemed harmless, but you never can tell about a crazy man. And he'll steal the socks off your feet if he gets the chance. . ."

CRAZY IKE must have been all of seventy, he had a long, snowy white beard. His home was a compact shack up against the flank of a barren hill. Outside his yard was piled high with heaps of cracked timbers, scraps of iron and discarded machinery, rusted buckets and broken tools and coils of rotted rope.

Crazy Ike sat on an up-ended nail keg, a shaggy hulk of a man, gripping the collar of a liver-colored terrier. The dog was growling at Charley Hackett, and Ike grinned up at Hackett with childish amusement.

"Nugget here, he don't like strangers. That's why he keeps growlin' at you. He thinks you came here to steal some of my things."

Hackett said, "I didn't come here to steal anything."

Ike rubbed the dog's stiff bristles. "You stop that growlin', Nugget. Everything's all right, boy. You stop your growling at the man."

It was hard to penetrate the haze that surrounded Ike's brain, and Charley Hackett said again, "I came here to see you, Ike. Sam Gepler sent me to see you. You remember Sam, don't you?"

Ike nodded. "I remember him, sure I do. He was always good to Ike, Sam was, and now I'm workin' for him. He's going to come back someday, Sam is, and we're going to start us up a mine. That's why I've got all these things here. We're going

to start us a mine and find a lot of pretty rocks, that's what Sam told me before he went away."

Charley Hackett explained patiently, "I was Sam's friend, Ike. But Sam is dead now."

"Dead?" It was slow sinking in. "Dead?"

"He died two months ago. Sam sent me here to see you. He said for you to give me the gold ore you were watching for him."

"Gold?" Ike frowned deeply. "You mean the purty rocks with yellow ribbons in them?"

Hackett nodded eagerly. "That's right, Ike. Sam told me to tell you. . ."

But Ike Stevens was a man with no value for time. He had to be reasoned with patiently, and the deep and feeble processes of his mind were slow to work. He looked at Hackett long and gravely, and then he shook his head.

"Mr. Sam was always good to Ike, and he said, 'Never let anyone take our pretty rocks away, Ike'. That,s what Sam said."

Impatience began clamping down on Charley Hackett. His hand was in his pocket, gripping his gun, and he wondered if it would do any good to bring the weapon out. But he decided against that. Old Ike was too crazy to have any regard for fear or threats.

Hackett swore harshly. "You old fool! Same gave me the pretty rocks, I tell you!"

Now anger was beginning to work through the slow moving recesses of Ike's brain. He said, "You go away. You go away, or I'll turn Nugget loose on you."

"Like hell I'll leave now!" Hackett cursed savagely. "I took care of Sam Gepler, and I'll take care of you if I have to. You've got that gold ore hid around here, and I'm going to have it."

Ike said, "Get him, Nugget!" and released his grip on the collar. It was just a small dog that could have done no serious damage, but Charley Hackett was waiting. The pup came bounding forward, all bark and no bite, but when it got close enough, Hackett brought his gun out, clubbed viciously with the barrel. The dog was dead when it slumped to the ground.

STEVENS stood up slowly. He looked at the dog's jerking body, and then he looked at Charley Hackett.

He said, "Why, you killed Nugget!"

There was more of hurt surprise in his tone than anger. Then he started toward Hackett, moving slowly, with his huge arms coming up. Hackett put his bullet through the oldster's thick body.

The impact of the slug halted Ike's lumbering walk. He looked at his chest, down low where his shirt front was rapidly staining red. The wound would have dropped any other man, and it would soon prove fatal to Ike. But Ike only stood there on his wide-planted legs, swaying slightly, and if he felt pain it did not show in his broad face.

He said almost resentfully, "You shouldn't ought to do that to old Ike."

He took a long stride toward Charley Hackett. Hackett shoved his gun toward the big man.

"You muddle-brained old fool! You

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want me to shoot you again? Stay away from me, damn you!"

Pain was biting into the dim recesses of Ike's brain, bringing a confused, childish panic into him.

"Old Ike didn't mean nothin! Don't hurt old Ike again."

"I'll shoot you again if you don't tell me where that gold ore is hidden! Now damn you tell me where it is."

Ike turned, lumbering toward his shack, and Hackett followed behind him. Ike suddenly turned and lunged wildly at Hackett. The younger man was too quick, he sidestepped and brought his gun down solidly on the oldster's head. Crazy Ike slumped to the floor.

Hackett swore violently as he bent over the fallen man to see if he were dead. Crazy Ike was breathing faintly, there was still some life in the old boy. Hackett reached for a bowl of water that rested on a nearby table. He doused it in Ike's face and grinned as the old-timer opened his eyes and struggled to his feet. He knew that Ike couldn't live much longer, but he would find the gold before the crazy fool passed in his chips.

Without saying another word Ike walked to the rear wall and pulled a blanket that had been nailed to it, exposing a low tunnel cut into the hillside. Crazy Ike picked up a thick, foot-long tallow candle from a corner of the tunnel. He lit it and handed it to Hackett.

"Now we'll go inside and take a look," Hackett said. "Don't try any more of your tricks this time, or it will be the last one you ever try!"

The tunnel had been cut through dirt and rock, and forty years idleness had dropped rubble to its floor. There were no bracing timbers, and this jabbed at the cautious streak in Charley Hackett. But tunnel walls that had stood for forty years were not likely to give way during the few minutes Hackett would be inside.

They worked their way deeper into the side of the hill, twenty feet, forty, and then they were in a broad and solidly roofed room. There on the bare rock of the floor lay the ore, high-grade stuff that Sam Gepler had said was worth from ten to a hundred dollars a pound. Chunks of rock that were ribboned with gold, choice pieces that had been stolen from Goldfield mines and sold to Sam Gepler.

"It's as pretty as a sack full of C-notes," Charley Hackett said.

The candle in his hand sputtered strangely, throwing a queer, acrid odor into the stale air of the cave. Against the flame's flickering light, Hackett saw the odd, almost childish expression of anticipation on Crazy Ike's face. It did something to Charley Hackett, warning him of a danger that he could not understand.

"What in hell is eatin' on you?" he rasped.

Crazy Ike said nothing. Weakness was robbing him of his strength, sliding him down the bare rock wall into a sitting position. But his wide blue eyes never left the thick candle that Hackett held in his hand.

Hackett spun, fear-driven, not knowing why he was doing it, and threw the candle frantically down the narrow slot of the tunnel. There was an explosion, a violent flare of flame, a concussion that knocked Hackett to the floor. He could hear falling dirt and rock sealing the long tunnel, and dust and smoke choked his lungs, and there was terror for him in the utter darkness all around.

He sat up, coughing and fighting to control his panic. He scratched a match, and light fell against Crazy Ike's stupid grin.

Hackett said against the fear that was clubbing his brain. "Why, there must have been a stick of dynamite molded inside that candle. You must have known it all the time!"

Ike nodded, still grinning.

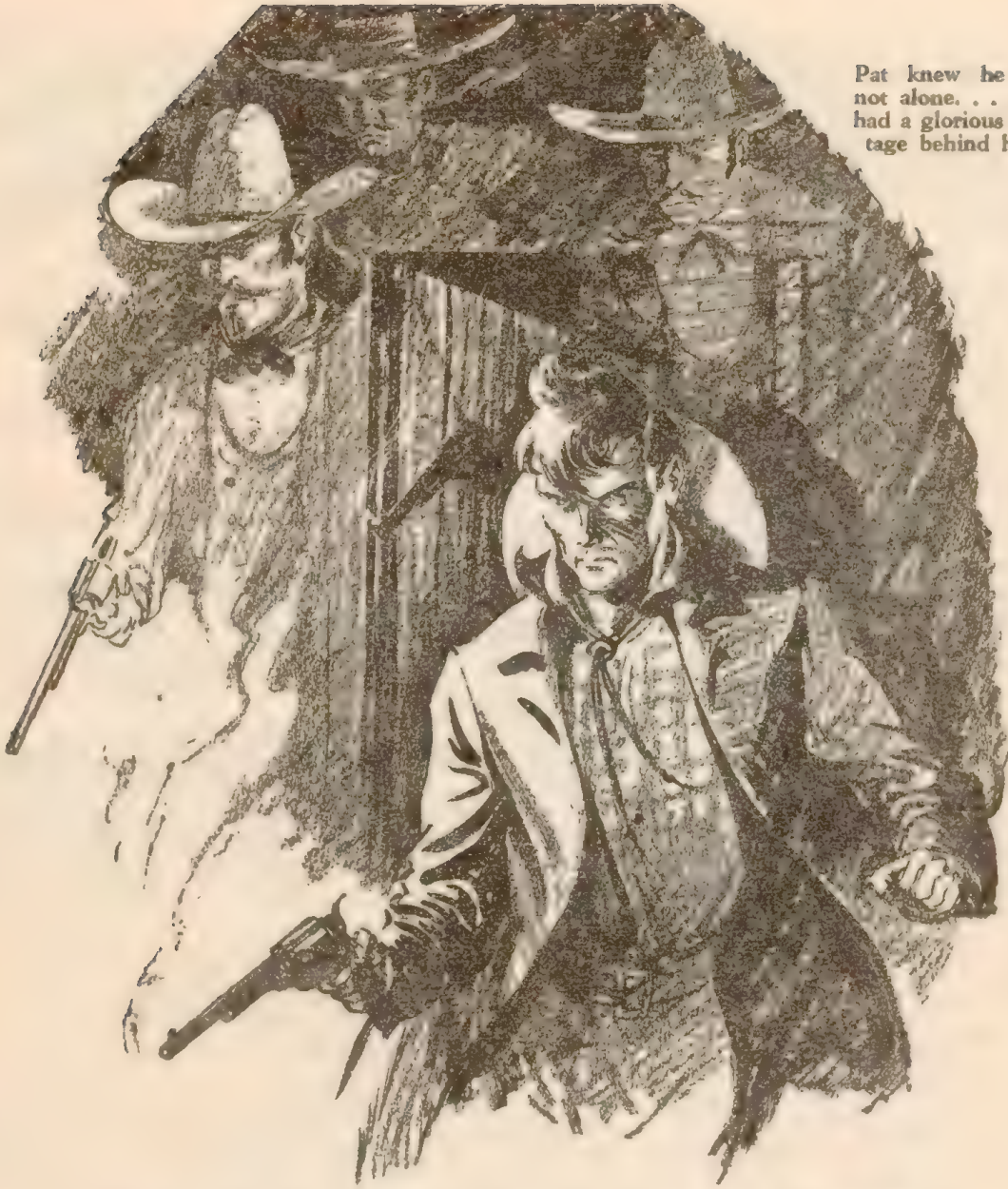
Hackett yelled, "Well, do something, man! The air in here won't last long. We've got to dig ourselves out. Do something, damn you!"

But there was a bullet in Crazy Ike's big body, and his weakness was inevitably growing, loosening the muscles of his face and making his grin appear even more witless in the shallow light of the match.

"I'm just wondering," he said.

"Wondering?" Charley Hackett flared wildly, "Wondering what, you old fool?"

Crazy Ike chuckled softly. "Just wondering," he answered, "which one of us will die first."



Pat knew he was not alone. . . . He had a glorious heritage behind him.

ONLY FOOLS DIE FOR CATTLE!

By THOMAS THOMPSON

Pat Thorsen figured he'd rather be a live coward than a dead hero. . . . But sometimes a yellow streak may assay a hundred per cent fighting manhood!

THE CLOUDS that swept across the towering peaks of the Greenhorns and oppressed the valley below, were no darker than the thoughts that ran through Pat Thorsen's mind as he raced the storm to his cabin. He tried to reassure

himself that he was doing the right thing. He could ride in to the Turkey Track and spread the alarm. There'd be twenty punchers after Luke Prody and his men inside of four or five hours. Over and over he told himself that, but always his conscience reminded him that a four or five hour start was all Luke Prody and his gunslicks ever asked for. The afternoon was heavy with the approaching storm when he reached the three room cabin on the knoll.

His wife Julie met him at the door, a glad smile on her face. But the smile froze and her parted lips and wide blue eyes became a question mark. "Something wrong?" she said, half fearfully, and Pat cursed his inability to conceal his emotions.

"Rustlers," he said curtly. "They drove off that herd of Herefords—"

"You all right?" she interrupted. "You're not hurt?"

He shook his head, not meeting her eyes.

She said, "Thank God," then. "Was there anyone—I mean did you get any of them?"

"Of course not," he said savagely. "Did you expect me to stand off a whole army by myself?" He moved forward quickly and put his arm around his wife's shoulder. "I'm sorry I spoke that way," he said.

"I understand," she said, leading him toward the house. "I'll fix you a bite before you ride in to tell Mr. Garfield.

He ate in silence, and Julie rushed from stove to table, setting the food before him, laying out his slicker and fixing a lunch between times. Only once did she speak. "Luke Prody?" she asked. When he nodded his answer she said, "He'll be gone by the time you get back. Too bad you couldn't have held him until help got to you—"

He dropped his fork with a clatter. "Suppose he is gone?" he said curtly. "What's fifty head of cows to Tom Garfield? You rather have me here or out there with a bullet in my guts?"

She looked at him a long time, then said slowly, "I just said it was too bad you couldn't have held him."

He finished the meal quickly, anxious to get out of the house. She had understood, he told himself. She wasn't of the old school that thought a man had to get himself killed in order to prove his worth. Or was she? Was that pain he was seeing in her eyes, or was it only the way the dim grayness of the late afternoon reflected there? Did her hand tremble a little when she handed him his slicker?" His gun and belt hung on the back of a chair. She picked it up and handed it toward him. As she did she took the gun from the holster and flipped the cylinder out. She snapped it shut again with a twist of her wrist and returned the gun to its holster. Pat Thorsen felt the perspiration stand out on his forehead.

"All right," he said bitterly. "Say something!"

"There's nothing to say, Pat," she said quietly. "I just wanted to make sure you had enough ammunition."

He buckled the gun around his waist and slammed his hat on his head. He took one look at the threatening sky and then swung into the saddle. It was the first time he had ever left the house without kissing his wife goodbye.

HE WAS down in the grassy flats where the Piute snaked through the valley when the rain started. Through the first hiss of scattered drops he could see the yellow lights of his father's house, perched there on the shoulder overlooking the valley. The old man would be sitting in front of the window now, as he did every night. Sitting there smoking his pipe and dreaming of the old days when the Thorsens owned all this valley and Thorsen guns kept rustlers out. Pat untied his slicker and slipped it on.

The storm broke with a suddenness, as if the peaks of the Greenhorns had lashed out in fury at the moisture laden clouds. And the wind came growling down the valley, beating the rain into his face. Through the rifts the light of the old home place winked out and beckoned. He thought some of riding up there—just to sit out the worst of the storm. An hour or two, maybe. Another hour or two wouldn't make much difference now. It was the thought of the look in Julie's eyes that held him back. His father would have that same look. Their eyes alike—Julie's and his dad's.

The wind was gusty, now, darting into a side canyon for a rest, then rushing out with renewed vigor. In those periods of quiet the rain came straight down in massive wet blankets, soaking everything it touched. It was good, he told himself. The grass had a good start—enough so it

wouldn't be washed out. There'd be good pasture this spring.

Then he asked himself what difference it made? After tonight there'd be no more valley for him. He'd go to Tom Garfield, spread the alarm, then he would leave for good. It would be better for Julie, being out of here. Maybe a town back east, where a man could make a living in a peaceful way. It would be better to raise a kid that way. There was a lull in the rain, then a clap of thunder opened the skies and the water descended in a solid mass. He reined his startled horse and rode hard toward the lane leading up to the old home place.

The sound of the horse's hooves slogging through the mud must have carried up to the old man, for Pat could see him standing there, framed in the yellow block of light that marked the door. "That you, Pat?" his father called. "What the devil you doin' out on a night like this? Figger on takin' up steamboatin'?"

Pat swung to the ground and led his horse under the leanto porch outside the door. He ducked quickly through the cataract that poured from the eaves. "Headin' for the ranch," he explained. "Got caught short."

"Get in here and dry out," his dad ordered. "Can't rain this hard forever."

Pat was in front of the fireplace and steam was curling from his Levis before his father pressed the questions Pat had been dreading.

"Man don't ride in this kind of weather lessen he has something on his mind," Harry Thorsen said. "I knew old Tom Garfield had been pushin' yuh, but I didn't know he was ridin' yuh in this kind of soup. What's up, son. Trouble?"

Pat looked at the lined face and the incredibly young eyes of his father. The old man hoisted one bowed leg over the other and hid his crippled hands between his knees. He had a habit of doing that. Pat answered his dad slowly. Hell-Fire Harry Thorsen was not a man from whom you kept secrets.

"Luke Prody," Pat explained. "Jumped me when I was taking a herd over to the Flintrock pasture. Got me there in Cajonita pass and made off with the whole bunch."

"The dirty son," Harry Thorsen whispered, his eyes flashing. "He wouldn't of dared that when I was ridin'—" He stopped suddenly, embarrassed by the slip he had made. After a minute he said, "You want me to ride over to Tom Garfield's, that it? You aim to hold Prody until I get back with the Turkey Track waddies?" They were direct questions, those, tinged with a bit of hope. Pat Thorsen squirmed uneasily. Again the keen eyes of his dad were on his face, and Pat twinged. His dad leaned forward, his eyes never leaving his son's face.

"I know how you feel son," the man said slowly. "'Taint no fun riding out alone that way with the night at your back and hot guns waitin' fer yuh. I had the feelin' myself, son, more than once. But it makes a man feel mighty big inside when he goes on anyway. And that's the way it is. If you work for an outfit, you fight for that outfit. I don't own the valley no more, son. It's Tom Garfield you're workin' for."

Pat Thorsen made no answer. He thought rapidly, counting the time that had passed. If he rode alone—if he rode fast— One man *could* hold one of those canyons for a short time. Even Prody wouldn't be driving cattle in this storm. He got up and walked over to the window that overlooked the valley. The rain was lashing against the squared panes. The darkness outside leered through the window and challenged a man to taste its terror. There was a cold tenseness along the back of Pat Thorsen's neck. He walked back to his chair and sat down heavily. He saw the look of fear in his dad's face. The old man seemed to have aged in the last few minutes. When he spoke his voice was more high pitched, like that of a man begging for understanding.

"There was never a man who wasn't scared some," Harry Thorsen said, peering into his son's face. "Never a one—lessen it was Wyatt Earp. But Wyatt was one in a million." His voice trailed off. For a long minute he stared at the fire. When he spoke his voice was normal. "You don't have to rush this minute," he said, clapping a hand on his son's shoulder. "I'll make a pot of coffee before we get started. Then you can help me saddle up that clay bank of mine." He left the room and Pat heard him clattering around out in the kitchen.

THERE were a lot of memories out there in that kitchen. His mother—his brother Carl. The mornings when there were hot biscuits and thick cream gravy, back in the

days before failing health had made Harry Thorsen sell to Tom Garfield and his big Turkey Track outfit. He remembered the worry laden days when he sat by the stove—waiting with his mother—while his dad and Carl were out, proving their right to be kings of the Greenhorn Valley. He cursed bitterly to himself. Proving their right and earning the undying hatred of men like Luke Prody. And where was his mother now? Dead before her years; dragged down by that same worry that established the name of Thorsen. And Carl? There's always a bullet somewhere marked for the man who lives by the gun. His thoughts were interrupted by his dad's return to the room. He had two cups in his cramped hands. "Still use milk, don't yuh?" he asked.

They sipped their coffee in silence for awhile, and the fire crackled and hissed sometimes when the rain beat its way down the chimney. Old Hell-Fire Harry Thorsen put down his cup and picked up a book. There was a strange twinkle in his eyes.

"Ned Buntline," he said slowly, letting the pages run through his gnarled fingers. "Ever hear of Ned?" Pat didn't answer, but he suddenly felt uneasy, wondering what trap his father was setting now. Harry Thorsen chuckled softly.

"Told a mighty good windy, Ned did," the elder Thorsen said. "Used to come out to Dodge and then write stories about what he had seen and sell 'em to the newspapers back east. Didn't mind fixin' a yarn up a bit, neither, Ned didn't." He put the book down and sipped noisily at his coffee. Pat Thorsen squirmed uneasily.

"Guess he thought about as much of Wyatt Earp as he did of Bill Cody," the old man went on. "Should of, too. Wyatt gave Ned a lot of stories—stories that didn't need much dressin' up." He paused and turned his piercing eyes on his son. "Guess you wonder what I'm leadin' up to, eh, son?"

He didn't wait for Pat's answer, but said, "What we was talkin' about is what made me think of it. I mean gettin' buck fever when you're goin' up against odds." He got up and poked at the fire. Standing there, facing the fire, Pat could see the straightness of his shoulders that even rheumatism had failed to touch. There was a nobleness in the way he carried his head.

"Guess Ned wanted to do something special for the boys there in Dodge," the old man went on without turning around. "Course, I was just a kid, but I was one of the boys there, so I come in on it second hand like." He turned now and faced his son, and Pat wished mightily that his dad would come to the point. He even wished that his dad would say the words that he knew were close—come out and accuse his son of being a coward—of not being worthy of the fighting name of Thorsen. It would be easier that way. The old man showed no indication of deviating from his tale.

"Ned sent to the Colt's factory for half a dozen special .45 sixguns. You know—regular old single action knuckle busters. Only Ned did it up special. Them guns had barrels four inches longer than standard. They was a whole foot long, them barrels. Had a demountable rifle stock on 'em, they did, and he give us each a hand-tooled holster just special for the guns." The old man sighed. "I was mighty proud of that gun." Pat waited, remembering the long barrel gun he had seen his father wear before rheumatism twisted the old man's hands.

"Me and Wyatt, Charlie Bassett, Bat Masterson, Uncle Billy Tilghman and Neal Brown, that's who got 'em," old Hell-Fire Harry said, flushing with memory. "Pretty big names, those, eh son? Well, I was one of the boys then. I could ride the river with the best of 'em. Course I never become famous like them boys did" but I was there.

"Bat and Bill Tilghman cut down the barrel on theirs, I think," the old man went on. "But Wyatt and Charlie Bassett and Neal Brown they left theirs just the way Ned Buntline ordered 'em, and that was good enough for me. Made a mighty good gun for buffaloin' a man over the head—" He paused and drained the last drop from his cup. "Made a mighty good gun for a man that got buck fever, too," he said, grinning at his son. "Man jerked that gun he always had the feelin' Wyatt and Bat and Bill and the rest was right there beside him, no matter where he was." He started back toward his chair.

Pat Thorsen ran his tongue over dry lips. It was no good. He could sit here the rest of the night with his dad trying to shame him into action, but it was no go. Rain or

no rain, he'd ride over to Tom Garfield at the Turkey Track and then be on his way. It would be better that way. There was something about the code of these old timers that he couldn't understand. He hadn't been born to be one of them.

Honor for your own outfit? He scoffed to himself. A waddie for Tom Garfield, that's all he was. Once he had ridden this valley as the son of a big man, but now he was a puncher, just like the rest. Sure, he and Julie had the cabin, he got ten dollars a month more than some of the boys. But he was just a puncher, and his boss was Tom Garfield—a boss who piled enough work on a man to kill him, then called for more. If you work for an outfit you fight for that outfit. Talk was old men's talk.

BUT he couldn't help think of the years ahead with the look that would always be in Julie's eyes. He started to speak, but was interrupted by a hammering on the door. He crossed the room, his mind still on Julie. When he turned the knob the door crashed open and a .45 jabbed into the pit of his stomach, making him sick with its violence. Above that gun leered the rain drenched face of Luke Prody, his lips drawn back in a savage grin. Two other men, guns drawn, stood behind their leader.

"Well," Prody said gleefully, "the old crip has got company. Come on in boys, its just the yeller belly that had the cows. He's harmless, he won't hurt nobody."

Luke Prody looked the room over appraisingly. His eyes stopped and sized up the pain bent body of old Harry Thorsen. "Glad to see yuh, Thorsen," Prody said then. "I told yuh I'd get yuh sometime."

When Harry Thorsen spoke his voice was vibrating with the rage within him. "Yuh never dared show yerself in this valley when I was a well man," he said shakily. Yuh waited 'till I was crippled up and didn't have no gun—" He turned pleading eyes on his son. Pat Thorsen recoiled from the look in his father's eyes. there was accusation—pleading—hope. And suddenly Pat realized that he would be willing to die to erase that accusation. But it was too late now. He knew now that this was what his conscience had been trying to tell him back there behind the rock in Cajonita pass. He moved slowly toward where his gun belt hung on the back of a chair, but stopped when Luke Prody's voice cut through the room.

"Keep away from that gun, yeller belly," Prody said. "Not that I'm afraid you'd ever use it, but even a rat gets jumpy when he's in a corner." He moved up to the fireplace, his men following.

The old man stood against the wall, and he seemed to wither as Pat watched him. The lines around his mouth sagged in complete finality. He no longer tried to hide his twisted hands. They were in front of him, clenching and unclenching, slowly, awkwardly. It was as if he were practicing for death—striving to restore one spark of life into those helpless fingers. Just a little. Just enough to pull a trigger once for a son who did not have the courage to do it for himself. Pat Thorsen saw that, and he understood. He moved quickly to his father's side. He did not recognize his own voice when he asked, "Where is it?"

He saw the soul reviving look of understanding on his father's face. Saw the old man become young as he darted toward the bedroom door. So great was the triumph of the old man that the roar of Luke Prody's gun and the thud of lead was as an undertone. Then the long barrel gun was there before him, hanging on the wall, its belt sagging with the brutal stub-nose .45 cartridges.

Something brushed Pat's leg as Prody's gun spoke again, but it didn't matter. He had his father's gun now—the "Buntline Special"— eighteen inches of avenging death was in his hand and his thumb was hooked over the heavy single-action hammer.

HE STOOD framed in the doorway, a perfect target for the rustlers. The long barrel of the Colt fell into perfect balance and lined on the belt-buckle of the nearest man. He saw the triple flash of gun-fire and felt the lead tear his flesh, but he grinned as he pressed the trigger and felt the old gun buck in his hand. There was no fear in him now.

Luke Prody had not earned his reputation by being a man who blew up in a gun fight. He crouched low, making himself a poor target, and his two guns roared out a double stream of death. Pat Thorsen realized that he had never been so calm in his life. He thought of little things now that

meant so much. Like the fact that his dad always kept one chamber empty in the old gun. He had fired twice. Three more to go. And still Luke Prody stood on his feet, his guns spewing.

The old "Buntline Special" roared again and Prody dropped to one knee. The outlaw's guns wavered now. Pat couldn't understand. Prody wasn't that badly hit. That look on Prody's face. That twisted, blanched look. Fear. That's what it was. Fear, Luke Prody was afraid of Pat Thorsen! He was cringing—sniveling. The outlaw raised his gun. Pat Thorsen's thumb hooked back the heavy hammer. The gun seemed to search out its own target. The trigger crawled back under the pressure of Pat's finger. Through the smoke he saw Prody slide forward. Through the smoke he saw the blue rimmed hole in Luke Prody's forehead.

Pat Thorsen shook his head to clear it. His father was crawling out from behind an overturned table, a sheepish look on his face. "Not much I could do to help yuh, son," the old man said. "I don't believe in interferin' with a fightin' man."

Pat knew it was the old man's way of handing out a compliment, but there was not time for that now. There were two more of Luke Prody's men out there in the night and there was a bunch of Hereford steers. Steers belonging to the Turkey Track—the outfit he worked for. When a man works for an outfit he fights for that outfit. "The cows must be in Pajaro canyon, dad," Pat said.

"Get over to the Turkey Track and get some of thee boys," Pat Thorsen ordered. "I'm goin' after them cows. Meet me at that cedar grove there in the canyon."

"I'm on my way, son," the old man said, beaming. "Shall I stop by and tell Julie you're all right?" Pat Thorsen didn't answer. He was outside the door and into the saddle, and the night rushed around him damp and friendly as he streaked toward Pajaro canyon.

It was funny how things happened inside a man. A few hours back he would have stopped and thought about this ride. Stopped and tried to figure out if there was anything to gain—figure out if maybe a man wouldn't be a sight smarter to play it on the safe side. But now he didn't pay it much thought at all. He knew that there ahead were two men with guns who were in the way. There ahead huddled in a dripping canyon were fifty head of top white faces belonging to his boss. There was a job to do.

IT WAS morning when Pat Thorsen came out of the canyon. The clouds had broken and the sun struck miniature rainbows from the drop on the newly scrubbed leaves of the chapparrel. There was blood on Pat Thorsen's clothes, and he walked with an unsteady step, as if not sure where to place his feet. But he walked. Back there in the canyon were two who would never again carry a running iron to a smokeless fire. Dimly Pat saw the wagon and the Turkey Track boys. Dimly he saw the beaming face of his dad—old Hell-Fire Harry Thorsen—and the face of Tom Garfield, the boss of the Turkey Track. But it was Julie who ran forward.

There was conversation then—a lot of it, but it really didn't matter. Julie was close, holding him, and her eyes were proud, like the eyes of a woman who depends on her man. He could hear his dad's voice, booming like it did ten years ago.

"You don't have to tell me, Harry," he heard Tom Garfield say. "I know a man when I see one. Hell, man, ain't I been planning' to make him foreman for the past six months? What you think I been loadin' it on him for?"

Pat Thorsen held his face close to Julie's. "They're wrong, Julie," he said in a whisper. I was scared. I was." She pressed her hand over his mouth.

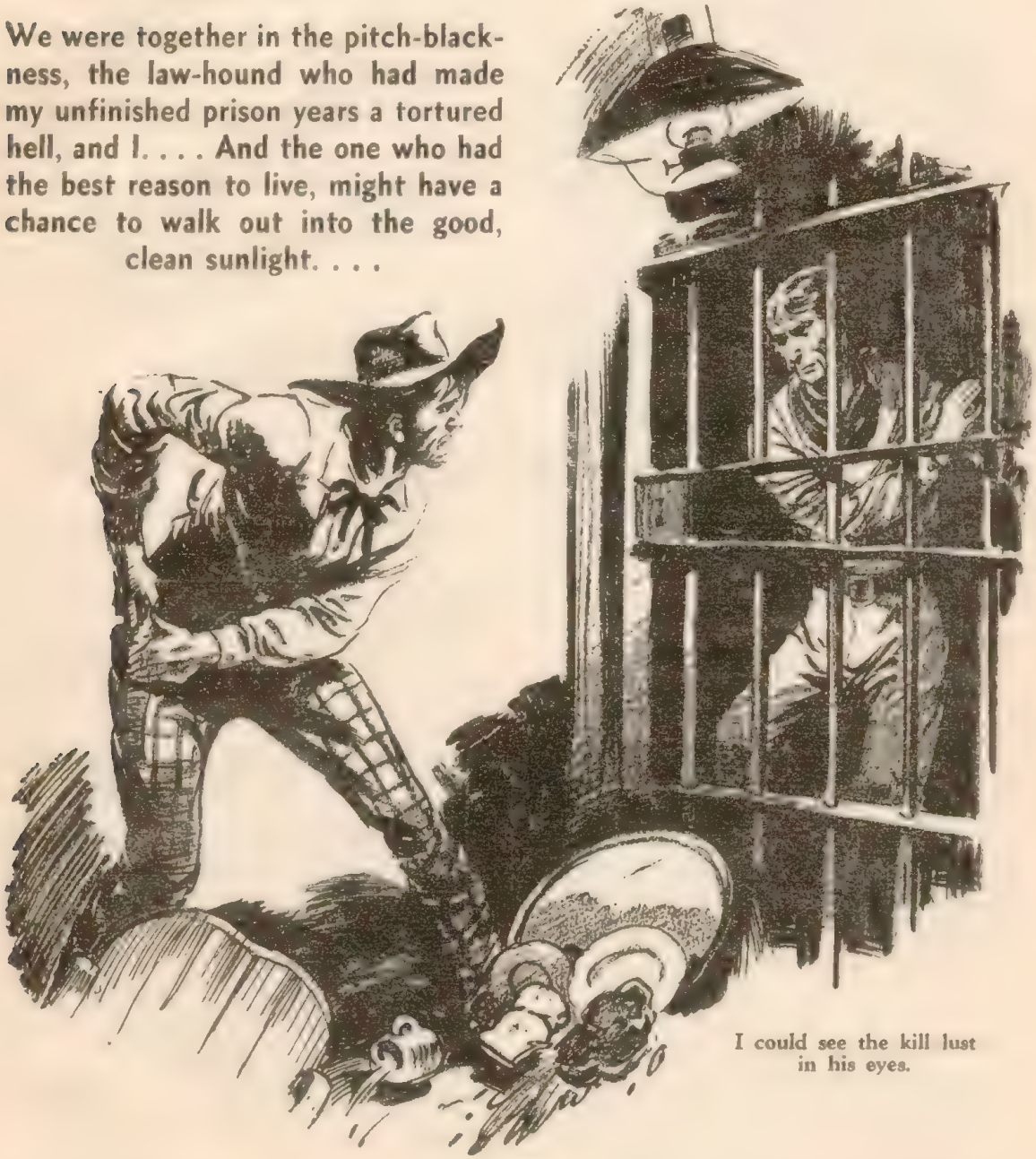
"I was awful scared when we first found out the baby was coming," Julie said softly. "I guess you and I are a lot alike." Dimly now he could see her eyes. They were still proud, but there was a new light. A light of understanding that he had searched for since he was a little shaver. Somehow he knew he would see that look in the eyes of men now, too. Julie said, "After I got over that first scare I knew I would never be afraid again." Tom Garfield's voice drowned out her words.

"All right, Harry," Tom Garfield said. "Quit arguin'. I always did say that son of yours was a man who would do to take along."

A REASON TO LIVE

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

We were together in the pitch-blackness, the law-hound who had made my unfinished prison years a tortured hell, and I. . . . And the one who had the best reason to live, might have a chance to walk out into the good, clean sunlight. . . .



I could see the kill lust in his eyes.

THE DEPUTY, Sam Bowdre, came in while I stood at the cell window, looking out on Rimrock's frozen street. It was noon, and the deputy had my mid-day meal on the battered tin tray. But I didn't turn when he came into the cell block. Only by refusing to betray the hunger gnawing at me could I fight the rawhiding of the deputy who brought my meals in each day, and I knew that. So I kept my eyes on the frozen ruts of the town's main street.

Bowdre always started out with the same thing. "It's a waste of good money, feed-

ing a man we're going to hang in another week," he said.

I turned slowly away from the barred window. It was late November. It was quite windy outside, and a ribbon of cold air leaked under the sash.

I looked at Sam Bowdre, a lean man with the same hint of quickness in the hard lines of his body that you could see in Billy the Kid, Ringo, and all the rest of the gun-quick clan. Like you could see in Jess Cutter, who had carved as wide and red a mark on Arizona as any other outlaw. I'm Jess Cutter.

I kept my eyes off the tray of food, looking steadily at the deputy. "You said that yesterday," I told him.

"And I'm saying it again!" A filed, kill-hungry edge rode Sam Bowdre's tone. "Better we fed this grub to hogs than to a killer we're going to hang next week."

It had been like this for a month since the sheriff's posse had jumped my chaparral camp and locked me in the Rimrock jail. Bowdre never gave up, constantly gouging me with his voice. It was all I could do to keep from taking his bait.

"They haven't strung me up yet," I answered him.

"We will in seven more days, killer."

Bowdre had a nasty way of knifing me with his tongue and his eyes. If there was any reason for his hatred, it lay in the vicious streak hidden in Sam Bowdre. And his jealousy. He was killer material, shrewd and ruthless, and he was one of those hombres who lack the nerve to go up against the law openly. So he did all his killing under the protection of the deputy sheriff's badge he wore, a galvanized outlaw.

HE WAS trying to rawhide me into making a foolish break, and I knew that.

"You'd like me to give you an excuse to turn your guns loose, wouldn't you?" I mocked.

He rubbed the palm of his hand across the butt of his holstered Colt. He gave me a sneering laugh. "All I want is a chance, Cutter. I'd like nothing better than to slam slugs through your guts."

I pushed away from the cell window, moving deliberately toward the bar-laced door that separated me from Bowdre.

"You'll never get a chance to build up your reputation by gunning me," I told him coldly.

He spat contemptuously. "You're yellow, Cutter!"

I shrugged.

He fitted a key into the lock of the cell door, twisted it savagely. His eyes were ugly and taunting.

"If you've got the guts, come on through, Cutter."

I halted at the door. I shook my head. "Suicide never was in my book, Bowdre."

"You're yellow."

"Not yellow, Bowdre. Just smart enough to know how to play what cards I've got left. If I opened this door you'd drill me, and then crow to the county you caught me trying to escape."

He made no attempt to hide the cruel run of his planning. "You'll die anyhow—in another week, Cutter—at the end of a rope."

"It's my neck."

"There's thirteen steps to the top of the scaffold they're building for you, Cutter." He was working on me with all the unleashed viciousness that was in him. "You'll walk up, but you won't walk down. They'll pull the hang knot tight under your left ear. You'll have time to look around and see things. You'll see things you want to touch, and you'll think of things you'd like to do. Only you'll know your time has run out, the hard way. You'll pull in a lungful of air, and wonder if the first drop through the trap door will finish you. Sometimes a man ain't killed by the first fall, Cutter. He hangs there and kicks and tries to breathe. . ."

"You're wasting your time, Bowdre."

". . . only there's a rope around his neck, and it keeps squeezing tighter, and he can't pull any air into his lungs."

"It's my neck, Bowdre," I repeated.

There was a small opening built in the cell door, just large enough for a plate of food to be passed through. I reached for the plate that was on the tin tray Bowdre carried. I almost got hold of it when he tilted the tray. The plate of food slid off the tray, overturning and spilling its contents out on the jail floor. Bowdre grinned at me in his thin, malignant way.

"That sure was too bad, Cutter," he said.

He stooped to the fallen food, scraping mashed potatoes off the dirty floor. He picked the slab of steak out of the month-old layer of dust, watching me narrowly all the while. I looked at this grimy food that was to be my noon meal, and for a moment I almost made that suicidal break Sam Bowdre wanted me to make. But I didn't.

Bowdre stood up, rawing me with his stare. He pushed the tray toward me. "That grub ain't fit for a dog now, Cutter. Which ought to make it about your style."

I'VE killed men in my time, plenty of them. But more than any of those others who went down under my guns, I wanted to kill Sam Bowdre. He had used every dirty trick in the books trying to needle me into making a break. He wanted my scalp, and he wanted my reputation. He was a glory hunter, mean and vicious. He was worse than any outlaw who ever rode the brush. An outlaw, no matter what his stripe, has the guts to go up against the law openly. Bowdre was a killer with a star, using his guns behind the veneer of an honest front. Which is about as low as a man can get.

Bowdre had me against the wall, and he knew it. He had ruined my food, and I was hungry; he had cussed me and taunted me. Yet all I could do was look at him and say nothing, thinking that if I ever lived to touch another gun Sam Bowdre would be my next man to kill.

The way I looked at him without speaking seemed to get under his skin, scaring him, scratching up the vicious streak that was in him. He cursed, low and harsh.

"Damn you!" he said. "Maybe this will make you do it!"

He reached for the cup of hot coffee that was on the tray. I knew what he meant to do. I stabbed my hand through the bars of the cell door to stop him. My sudden movement jarred the tray, and some of the hot coffee sloshed across the back of my hand. The steaming liquid burned, and it was like fire suddenly spilling all through me, breaking loose everything that had been piled up inside me since I was locked up.

One moment I had been fighting to keep my head, and the next moment I didn't care what happened. All I wanted was to hand back a little of what Sam Bowdre had handed me.

I grabbed up the cup of hot java, and threw it into Bowdre's face. His thin, strangling scream was more from sudden fear than from pain. He tried to lunge back, blinded momentarily by the steaming liquid, but I reached through the bars and caught the front of his shirt. I jerked him close, and grabbed for his holstered gun. I missed. I tried to spin him around for another try, but panic and hatred made him more than I could handle.

He twisted away, ripping his shirt as he broke loose from my grip. He swiped his sleeve across his eyes, clearing his vision. This was it, and I knew it.

"You won't come through that door, then take it where you are, damn you!"

He reached for his gun.

A voice called out, "Bowdre!"

The deputy only partially slowed the up-swing of his gun. His thumb was earing the hammer back.

Again the voice called out. "Bowdre, what's goin' on back there!"

A door slammed, loud in the silence, and hurried boots scraped on the floor of the jail office. Sam Bowdre's gun froze, half level, and I could see caution slide into his face. It was like a veil dropping across his features, hiding the murder lust that was in his eyes, rubbing the pinch of cruel temper from his mouth. He turned his head slightly as Ben Lestrade came running into the cell block.

"This dirty son tried to bust out, sheriff," was what Sam Bowdre said.

The sheriff pulled up, a short, solid man with rock gray eyes. He looked at me.

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"Get back away from that door, Cutter!"

It was enough to almost make me laugh. I told the sheriff, "You two ought to get together on what you want me to do."

Lestrade gave me a stony stare, and his square hand was wrapped tight around the butt of his gun.

"What do you mean by that?"

I LOOKED at Bowdre. He was a little white around the mouth, but the shrewd, self-certain streak was back in him now. Telling the sheriff what had happened would do no good, and I knew that. Sam Bowdre was the man on the high horse in this town. He was smooth, and he knew his politics. He was smart. He could do murder—and had done it more than once—and still keep his reputation as a tough, duty-bound lawman.

Lestrade asked again, "What did you mean by that crack?"

I shrugged.

"Then get back away from that door," the sheriff snapped.

I stepped back into the cell, taking with me the key I had pulled from the lock of the door. I sat down on my bunk, groping behind my back. I found the bar of soap tucked under the straw pillow.

Sam Bowdre said smoothly, "I brought him his food, and that monkey tried to get tricky. He threw a cup of hot coffee into my face, and that gave him the jump on me. He got my key, and held me pinned to the bars while he unlocked the cell door. He was tryin' to get my gun when I broke away. For a while I was afraid I'd have to shoot him."

"Yeah," I muttered.

Ben Lestrade's eyes were quick and sharp, missing nothing. He said, "The key ain't in the door now." He jerked his glance to me. "All right," he said.

I just looked at him.

Temper got into the sheriff's square face. "You want us to come after it, or you want to just toss that key out here?"

I skidded the key under the door to him. He picked it up and left.

It took me three days to batter and scrape the jail spoon until it fitted the mold I had made by pressing Sam Bowdre's cell key into the bar of soap.

On the fourth night, I unlocked the cell door, and walked out.

I had, I figured, about an hour before the sheriff's night man made his periodic check-up of the cell block and discovered my escape. Within the space of that time, I could steal a horse and be well out of reach of any posse Ben Lestrade could send after me. A man on the dodge can make a long track in sixty minutes.

But I couldn't get Sam Bowdre out of my mind. Call it fool stubbornness, call it pride or sheer cussedness—anything you want. But Bowdre had roughed me up with every trick in the book, and I couldn't forget that. And I couldn't forget that he would have murdered me if the sheriff had not showed up at the wrong time.

"All right," I muttered. "It's your turn this time, Bowdre."

It's queer how a man can hate so much that even the safety of his own life is ignored. Going after Sam Bowdre, I knew, was the next thing to suicide. I would get him, but by that time every man in town would be out hunting me.

But a man in my business—an outlaw—lives in a world of his own making. Maybe he starts out like I did, a little wild and full of ambition. I was going to carve myself out a place in the sun, the quick and easy way. My boss wouldn't miss the few head of cattle I needed to get a start, and besides I told myself I'd pay him back later on, after I'd got my start. Only I didn't get the chance. I was caught with a running iron in my hand, and there was a shooting and I saw a man fall under my gun.

I left Texas on a fast horse, but I didn't run far enough. News of the shooting followed me, and was magnified with each telling. The man I'd shot had friends, and there was more trouble, and before long I was saddled with shootings of my own and a bunch I had never committed. That is how Jess Cutter got his name on a dead or alive dodger.

I ANGLED across Rimrock's street, thinking only of putting a slug into Sam Bowdre. I followed an alley to the livery, picked out a horse and saddled it. The noise I made brought the night man out of the livery's office.

The man called out, "That you, Tate?"

I picked up the reins, leading the horse across the compound toward the gate. The livery man limped toward me.

He said petulantly, "A man gets a few drinks under his belt, and he figures he's all cream and no skim. You want to handle your horse personal that's all right with me, Tate. Only why didn't you stop off at the office and let me know?"

I kept moving toward him through the darkness. He was a thin and stooped oldster, made irritable by his interrupted nap. He was shivering from cold, and now alarm was drawing his head up.

He said queruously, "Dammit, Tate, can't you talk?"

I said, "I'm not Tate."

I stepped close as he reached for his gun. I caught him with a blow—one was enough. He spun and went down, and I bent over him, removing his belt gun and strapping it around my waist.

I turned away, but after a step, swung back. He was a little old guy who had been filed thin by his age, and death could come silently certain to an unconscious man in that freezing night wind. I carried the man to his office.

It is easier to live in Darkness than in the Light!

I don't know what made me remember that. It came to me as I closed the door on the unconscious old man. I don't know where I heard it—perhaps from some sky-pilot long forgotten in the past, or maybe it was the teacher during my single year of school.

But whoever had first made that statement had spoken outlaw's gospel. It's easier to live in darkness for the simple reason that an outlaw is safer when he is enveloped by darkness.

It's easier to kill in darkness.

I located Sam Bowdre's house at the edge of town. Through the window, I could see him pacing the room, restlessly feline in his movements. His wife was seated in one corner, a slender care-worn woman who must have been pretty if she smiled. But I had a feeling she found little in life to make her smile. Not as long as her husband was near.

Sam Bowdre was eyeing her malignantly, chewing on her with words I could not hear against the raw whispering of the wind under the eaves of the house.

Bowdre was a tin god in this county, but he was everything mean and dangerous to his wife and to the outlaws he came up against. He had wanted nothing more than to murder me that day in the jail, but the sheriff had broken up his play. Bowdre had had no chance at me since then, and now he was taking it out on his wife.

I went back to my horse, and swung into the saddle. I could have drilled him through the window and got away clean, but I didn't want Sam Bowdre that way. I wanted him to get it the way he had tried to give it to me—slow, the hard way.

I rode up to the house, kicked on the door.

I yelled against the wind, "Bowdre, get down to the jail, man! Jess Cutter just broke out!"

I reined back up the street a dozen rods, pulled in at the front of the feed store to wait. Bowdre came out of the house at a hard run. He saw me in front of the feed store, and yelled,

"What's up! Dammit, what's up!"

He was intent on the jail, and his hard run carried him three full strides past me. Then that unforgotten sixth sense that is in all gunmen jerked him to a halt. He stood there at the edge of the street, stiff and motionless, and he must have been hearing the bell of danger jangling in his brain, and he must have known a deep strike of panic. He was that kind of man. He could be brave when it was easy to be brave. But he knew only fear and panic when the scales were balanced.

I SAID, "Yeah, Bowdre, it's me!"

He turned slowly, as though even that movement took a definite pull of his

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will. Moonlight struck him, and sickness was in his face. His lips were loose. He turned his hands palm out toward me.

"My God, Cutter—don't do it!"

I sneered, "You sing two different songs, Bowdre. One high, and one low, snake low."

He made a begging gesture with his hands. Now that he was up against the trouble he had built for himself he wanted to crawl away and hide. He didn't have the town watching him make a glory ride with a handcuffed outlaw. He didn't have the town watching him roughhouse an unarmed man. Panic had cracked away the shell of his false glory, laying bare all the weakness that was in him. What he showed there on the street wasn't good to see in a man. I spat contemptuously.

"You're even yellower than I had you figured, Bowdre."

He was yellow and he was smart, and he was all the more dangerous because of this combination. There was no code or creed to shackle the treachery that was in him. Driven, he could—and would—resort to the lowest sort of trickery.

A measure of assurance crept into his tone as he faced me in front of the feed store.

"You're not going to kill me, Cutter," he said. "You think you are—that's how you planned this—but you missed one bet."

I watched him narrowly. "Don't count too much on that."

His confidence grew stronger, and now he laughed at me, softly mocking.

He went on, "When you set this trap, you figured I'd throw guns with you. That was your first mistake." He lifted his hands high. "I won't draw with you, Cutter."

"You're yellow, Bowdre!"

He grinned at me through the darkness. "Your second mistake was not knowing yourself as well as I know you. I've studied your record, Cutter. You've built yourself a reputation as an outlaw, but you've never drilled a man who didn't slap leather first. It ain't in you to shoot me in the back."

He turned then, showing me his back. He started slowly up the street.

I raised my voice just enough for my words to reach him. "Are you sure I won't, Bowdre?"

But I didn't need that statement to drive him into action. Sam Bowdre trusted the judgment of no man, and from the first his move was spurred by cunning and desperation. He took two deliberate strides away from me, and that was calculated to throw me off guard. He spun with even more speed than I had expected, veering into the open doorway of the feed building. His bullet whipped past me as I dropped out of saddle. I pressed close to the wall of the building, as the echoes of Bowdre's shot went jarring through the town.

I called out, "You ain't the only one who can figure out a man, Bowdre. I knew you'd try to get in there when I stopped you here. It's your way of fighting."

I paused briefly, listening to the commotion stirring up along the street. Men were shouting, and men were running into the street in sleep-broken confusion. The space of the next minute held everything in the world for me, and I knew that. I could break out of town while there was still time left, or I could stay and finish my job with Bowdre, and that was the next thing to suicide.

I called out, "I'm coming in, Bowdre."

It was a double door in the feed building, with one half closed and the other open. I hit the closed half with my shoulder, then sheered off through the open way as Bowdre's slug kicked splinters out of the thin panel at my side.

I put the wall to my back, side-stepped along it through the darkness. Bowdre punched three quick shots through the blackness, but he couldn't find me. I laughed at him.

"You're making a good target, Bowdre."

I could almost see panic wrapping around Sam Bowdre again. He had played out his trick, but I was still alive and in the same room with him. Fear broke out his high-pitched shout.

"Sheriff! It's Jess Cutter loose in here! In here with me!"

"They can't help you now, Bowdre. I'm coming after you."

There was a confusion of noise outside the building, men milling and rushing, shouted questions and hard-bitten answers.

"It's Jess Cutter in there! We got him bottled up tight. . . ."

"Yeah, but Sam Bowdre is in there with him."

"Sam can take care of himself. . . ."

I called through the heavy darkness. "You hear that, Bowdre? You've showed them a dozen times how tough you are. You can put on a real show this night."

SOMEWHERE ahead of me near those high mounds of sacked grain I could hear Bowdre's hoarse breathing, like paper rubbing paper. I could hear him, but I could not see him in the sealed darkness of the big room.

I took off my hat, sent it into the blackness to my left. It scraped the floor with a low, whispery sound. Bowdre punched the darkness with the red finger of a shot, and I heard the following click of his gun hammer striking spent shells.

"Better load up, Bowdre. You were only shooting at my hat that time."

He made a shallow whimpering sound of fear.

Someone outside shouted, "You all right, Sam?"

But caution kept Bowdre from answering and revealing his position.

I said, "Next time it might be me you hear, and not just my hat, Bowdre."

A man outside sent up an anxious cry, "Sheriff, maybe you ought to go inside and give Sam a hand."

And a dozen voices answered, "Bowdre has handled worse than Jess Cutter. He's got that outlaw cornered, and it ain't for us to horn in. We'd be in Sam's way. . ."

Silence closed in, so heavy and black that it was like a definite weight pressing down on the room. I stopped moving, waiting and wondering if Bowdre was shifting around to line my shape against the fainter darkness of the open door behind me.

It's easy to live in Darkness, that unforgotten voice from the past had said.

It's easy to die in darkness.

There was a woman's anxious cry outside, and some man's steadying reply. "It's all right, Mrs. Bowdre. Ain't a man inside a hundred miles better cut out for this kind of work than your husband. We've seen Sam handle worse than Jess Cutter. He don't want any help in there."

The silence of the blackened room stretched on, pulling taut and thinning out. It was a silence that could bring a shattering shot and swift death, or it could break a man with its utter soundlessness.

Bowdre's words came first in a hoarse whisper. "My God, Cutter!"

I didn't answer.

He was somewhere in the black yonder, perhaps maneuvering desperately, perhaps rooted by his own panic.

"God, Cutter. . ."

"Whining won't help, Bowdre."

His gun broke into a convulsive yammering that shook the walls of the room. Silence rubbed out the echoes, and I could hear him fumbling new loads into his gun. I laughed at him.

Come Home To Die!

It was a happy moment for Captain Lon Buell, when he and his pegleg pardner approached the fertile valley of El Seguro. For, to him, the ignominy of the Confederate defeat was over. . . . But instead of the peace and quiet he sought for, he became a living ghost in the midst of a range war that was a counterpart of Shiloh's bloody field.

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"You made a lot of light with your muzzle flame, Bowdre. Too much light. Don't make this too easy for me."

I heard him change his position frantically.

His wife cried out, "Sam—Sam!"

I said, "Funny how a woman can be beaten like you've beaten your wife, and still she'll take up for you. Women like that are fools. Or maybe they're that way because they're women. Your wife will probably even cry over your grave, Bowdre."

"I don't want to die!" A thin, broken voice out of the darkness.

"Shut up, Bowdre."

But there was no shutting Sam Bowdre up. He had cracked, and now he was falling apart. He had ridden high and wide behind his law badge. He had built up his own glory, and now he was being destroyed by what he had made. He had piled up a reputation without having the bottom to carry it.

"Stay away from me, Cutter!"

"I'm coming in."

His voice rose, thin-pitched and wild. "Don't do it, Cutter—please! I'll do anything you say. I'll tell them how I treated you in the jail. I'll tell them I tried to kill you. I'll tell how I used all those others before you. . ."

"Have you got to drag your wife into the mud with you? Shut up, Bowdre!"

His voice was sickening to hear. "I only wanted to go to the top, Cutter. You can't blame a man for his ambition, Cutter. Maybe I did go at it wrong. But I don't want to die for it."

"I'm coming after you!"

I STARTED forward. His voice had given me the direction I needed, and finding him would be easy. He would be close to the west wall, hemmed in there by the high bins of grain. Finding him would not be hard at all. . . .

The voice of his wife came in from the street. "Sam—oh, Sam!"

It was a thin cry, bitter and anxious, and the fright in it halted me. It was like a blade cutting into the darkness, cutting into me. It unlocked something inside me, that hard stoniness that had always before made killing an easy thing to do. It brought light into darkness, it brought in something I could sense and feel but not understand.

"You still love this man?" I called out.

"Yes—yes."

I said harshly, "He's all bluff. He's a coward."

"I know that. I don't care."

Whose right is it to say if women are fools, or whether they are made better and finer because of the mean streak that can be in a man? It was a question I could not answer.

Yet maybe the answer was in me all the time. Maybe a woman can't help loving a man no matter what he is. I could kill Sam Bowdre as I had planned to do, and perhaps save this woman—the one out there on the street—a lot of grief. Bowdre had not given her much in the past. Nothing to make her smile.

But, standing there in the darkness, I wondered if that woman on the street was not a lot wiser than Jess Cutter and his gun.

Bowdre had ruled his wife, beaten her will down with his arrogance, and now that was gone. Standing there in the blackness, I realized she was willing, even eager, to accept him for what he was. Now she could rule him, and perhaps in that find a measure of happiness.

My gun was still leveled when Sam Bowdre broke and ran. He plunged through the doorway, and into the crowd, and only the woman who was his wife followed him.

There were those in Rimrock who wanted to carry out the court's sentence and hang me. But the Law acts in strange ways, more fairly than I could have ever before believed.

Looking back now, those twelve years in prison weren't so hard to take. When I got out, I located me a little place up in the hills, a cabin and a piece of land and enough cattle to hack out all I want from life. I can have my smoke after the day's work, and I can watch the sun go down without wondering if there's a law posse out there in the brush hunting for me. I can even use my real name now—Jess Kirby.

And every once in a while I get down to Rimrock to visit my sister, who is the wife of the man I once swore I'd kill.

HE SHOT TO KILL

By C. W. CHAMBERLAIN

Frank Canton, tough Johnson County marshal, blandly admitted that he might have been one of the deadly, cold-blooded killers to hide behind an official shield. . . . But he would be sure to add that the West never would have been tamed without his help.

IT WAS some miles west of Buffalo, Wyoming, back in the Big Horns, that Sheriff Frank Canton and two deputies discovered the hideout of "Teton" Jackson, most notorious of the Northwest's badmen and for whom the famous Jackson Hole was named.

That fall night, in 1887, was cold and moonless and the law officers were chilled when they came upon the abandoned cabin in the rock strewn ravine. A light flickered through the chinks between the logs, where the dried mud had fallen away. The men dismounted and ground-hitched their horses.

"Take it easy, boys," the tall, white-moustached sheriff said, his steel gray eyes cold and calculating, "He's a dead shot and probably won't be taken alive. Sam, you stick the muzzle of your rifle through a crack in the cabin and keep him covered while Hank and I walk in on him through the door. Remember that this hombre is as tough as they come and won't be taken without a fight."

Teton and the Jackson Hole Gang had been making things plenty tough for Frank Canton, Johnson County sheriff, as well as for peace officers in other Wyoming and Idaho sections.

He was wanted for stage robberies, train holdups, bank raids and for almost every other crime committed in those parts. The capture of the notorious leader was an honor coveted by all lawmen.

Cautiously, Canton and his deputies stole toward the cabin. When they reached the dilapidated shack, they were able to see plainly that the outlaw chief was inside.

Teton had built a blaze in the fireplace and, seated on a rickety stool, was leaning forward, warming his hands. Across the room, on a three-legged table, was the outlaw's cartridge belt, holster and Colt. The peace officers chuckled with satisfaction. Even the best of men make mistakes and one of the worst couldn't always be without error. Teton never could explain this mistake of separating himself from his gun.

"Stick an inch or two of your Winchester between the logs," Canton whispered to the short, stocky deputy. "If he starts to pick up that pistol, trigger your gun fast and don't miss."

Silently, the deputy eased the muzzle of his rifle between two logs and watched Teton as he stirred the fire. Then he saw the bandit arise from the stool and saunter across the room. He paused at the table, rubbed his hands together and thoughtfully looked down at his gun.

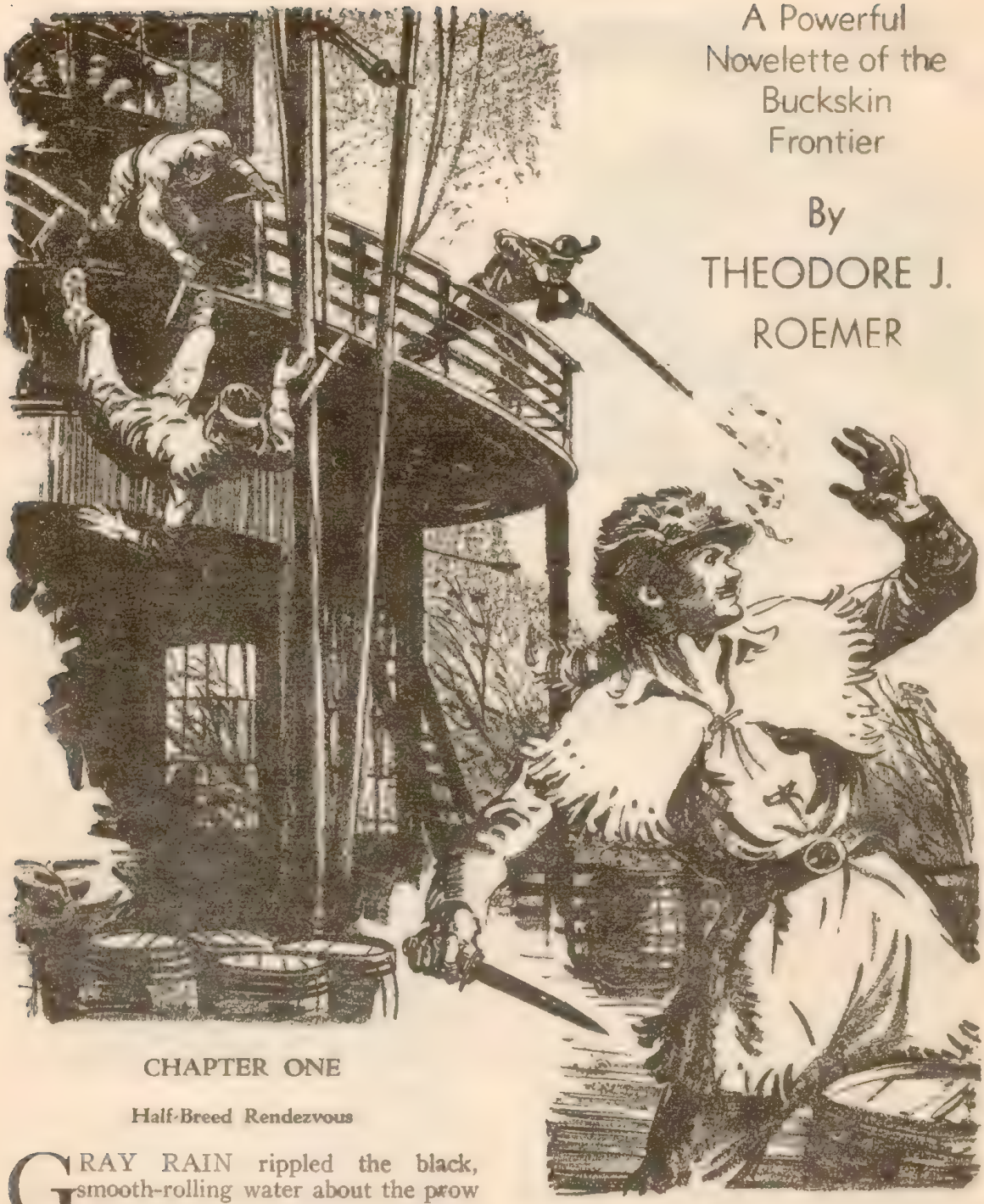
Sam was watching the huge, red-headed, gangling outlaw as a cat watches a mouse, his finger steady on the trigger. One wrong move and a slug would blast the gang leader to Kingdom Come.

But Teton turned away from the table, strolled back to the stool and reseated him-

(Continued on page 97)

A Powerful Novelette of the Buckskin Frontier

By THEODORE J. ROEMER



CHAPTER ONE

Half-Breed Rendezvous

GRAY RAIN rippled the black, smooth-rolling water about the prow of River Silver's canoe. It clouded the far shore of the Missouri in a fine white mist and made the nearer shore, which River was hugging, a dripping, almost impenetrable, green shield of willow and cottonwood. And River wanted to see through that screening wall. Night was coming on.

He'd seen signs of Gunsolis and his half-breed pack all along the trail. And Bracha's fur cabin, if he remembered correctly, would be in any one of these inlets, almost hidden. Gunsolis would stop at Bracha's. They were two of a kind.

He crouched in the stern of the racing, high-tilted craft, trailing his paddle warily. His lean buckskin-clad body was slicked down with rain. He had come all the way from Milk River junction in an effort to catch up to the breed. With a scowl he shook the drops of water that gathered on the coonskin fur above his eyes, impairing

That Bloodstained Buckskin Trail

"Them that are born with the river—will die with it!" That was what "River" Silver's father had told him. . . . But that young buckskin plew-hunter decided to choose his own kind of death—despite all the bushwhack odds a fur-pirate crew could stack against him, in a last-hope gamble for an untamed wilderness empire!

Silver drew back as he saw the flying figure lunge towards him.

his sight, and swung his glance up and down the shore, growing darker with shadows.

The wink of light caught his eye. He would have missed it through the trees if he hadn't been looking sharply. He cut the paddle sharply and shot the boat through the slight opening. A low, log cabin appeared in the dank forest.

He looked swiftly for the six mackinaw boats that held his and Moose Jons' stolen fur but the great fifty-foot river boats were not to be seen. And then River knew Gunsolis was afraid of being trailed. He had hidden the mackinaws along the river bank

and then walked to his friend's hidden cabin.

River swung his slight, birch craft into a willow copse and leaped lightly to the spongy bank. There was a rifle and small pack in the canoe. He left them both, and, with a pat at the knife sheath at his waist, he stole silently through the wet underbrush for the forest-side of the cabin. Already he could hear sounds of dancing and singing.

River wasn't certain that Gunsolis had their fur, but when a man of the breed's stripe runs the treacherous Missouri at night to get out of trapper territory, something is mighty wrong. He'd heard tales of the renegade buyer before. And Moose Jons was ten days late for their rendezvous on the Milk.

The young trapper had an ominous hunch that Gunsolis had a great deal to do with that delay.

He and Moose had pooled their catch with half a dozen other trappers on the upper Yellowstone and were going to run it down to St. Louis, when a change in plans had sent River on ahead to stop the fur steamer, *Great West,* which always made a trip to the Milk and back for the first haul of fur out of the territory. And the first fur to St. Louis always commanded the better price.

But the steamer had come and gone, and Moose and his mackinaws didn't show up. River waited six more days in the rain-soaked wilderness and then in the grey of morning he'd seen Gunsolis stealing past with his pack of breeds and six mackinaws. Two of the boats hadn't the tomahawk insignia Gunsolis always crudely carved on his boats and River was instantly suspicious. He waited a couple of hours, hesitant, then leaving a fallen pine pointing down the river, with markings to indicate why he had gone, he left the rendezvous point and took after the half-breed. He was one man against twelve.

HE DREW close to the cabin and peered through the single, smoky window. His gray-green eyes lighted as he saw the festive group.

They were all half-breeds—buckskin-clad, with black, straight hair, beaded moccasins —and they were rolling with Bracha's whiskey, stamping in the pools of mud and water on the cottonwood planked floor, howling their lusty chansons, which they'd learned from the French. They were oblivious to the rain dripping from the rafters; their smoked, bear-greased buckskins shed it readily. Most of them were very drunk.

And in the center of the melee was Gunsolis.

He danced with his thick arms half raised. In the yellow light of the single kerosene lantern hanging from a rafter, the knife scars on his swarthy cheeks gave him a hideous look. His black stringy hair had fallen down from under the shapeless felt hat—a relic from some hapless victim—and in his jiggling, great rolling drops of sweat spattered from his greasy face. Bright metal coins on a string around his bulky neck jingled as he danced.

"Who-o-e-e!" River heard him howl as he grabbed a fat little miniature of himself and danced with the other to collide heavily against a make-shift bar at the far end.

River recognized the other as Pierre Bracha, said to be Gunsolis' half-brother. Both had the same fat, sly face, only Bracha's was minus the ugly scars.

A movement back of the stove caught River's eye and with a start of surprise he saw two utter strangers in that room of half-breeds.

One was tall and in strange garb for a man in the Missouri river wilds. A knee-length black broadcloth coat hung from his bony shoulders, and his butternut pants weren't for the brush. They were wet and muddied now, but not thorn-ripped.

He had on a cap, something like a river pilot's cap, only this one was free from grease and stains. A waistcoat showed from under the black coat and it was faded and flowered. The man's face was like his clothes—long and worn and sad.

River couldn't see the other man very well, but the shorter looked little more than a youth. He was clad in buckskin and he wasn't of the trail either; his fringed leggings were not even muddied.

River looked back to the man wearing the pilot's cap and the sight of the cap brought swift memory to the young trapper. His dad had worn one of those. River could remember how proud he'd been when his dad had let him come up into the pilot house of the tall, majestic Blue Chimney steamer for the first time. His dad was

Cap Silver, one of the most famed pilots along the Missouri.

River had been born on one of the runs down to St. Louis and his poetic mother had named him River Silver. Cap Silver had hoped that his son would become a river pilot like himself, but after a few months as cub pilot, the frontiers had called. Eighteen year-old River Silver followed that impulse and ran away.

All these things went fleetingly through River's mind as he stared at that pilot's cap on the man, and then he remembered the job before him.

From those half-breeds he had to find out if Moose was alive, and where their furs were.

Moose had saved his life in a river brawl at Pierre. It wasn't River's fight, but Moose had killed a man in saving River's life. After that they'd been partners, and the great red-bearded man and the yellow-haired youth became known the length of the river among trappers.

At the thought of Moose, River fingered his knife. He saw Bracha stagger behind the bar. The half-breed was very drunk.

The thought gave rise to a desperate plan. There was a door behind Bracha. It very probably led from the woodshed lean-to at the rear of the cabin. River plucked out his knife and stole to the woodshed.

There was no door on the shed opening. It was inky black inside. By feel River moved noiselessly through a clutter of woodchips, axes, fur stretchers and what-not to the yellow crack in the cabin door. He felt at the hinges. Leather! They wouldn't squeak. And what noise he made opening the door would be drowned in the drunken men's howling. If he could get to Bracha, before the fat half-breed grabbed the rifle at his back.

HE OPENED the door steadily, tensed and sprang.

He shot into the yellow light like a puma striking down a deer. His left arm encircled Bracha's short fat neck. The eight-inch Green River blade whipped up, poised quiveringly at the half breed's throat. River shouted:

"Gunsolis!"

The fur brigand froze in his dance. The room was suddenly full of arrested figures. As one they turned toward the bar. They saw a tall, yellow-haired buckskin-clad trapper holding Bracha off the floor and pointing a knife at his throat. Already the kicking Bracha was growing purple.

"River Silver," Gunsolis breathed, almost in terror.

At the name a quiver went through the men in the room. They stared at the brawny youth.

River laughed harshly. "Know me, eh? I killed two of your men a winter ago when they were back-tracking me, robbing our lines. Remember?" His laugh ended and hard lines clamped about his chiseled jaw. "I'm killing Bracha now, see—unless you tell me what you did to Moose Jons."

For an instant Gunsolis' face was a greasy, blank stare of stupefaction. River saw guilt, fear, slide fleetingly beneath the black eyes, then the breed recovered his craftiness. Feigned surprise flooded the shoe-button orbs.

"Moose Jons? What are you talking about, M'sieu?"

"You know what I mean," River shot back. "Moose an' a couple of helpers were

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bringing fur down Bear Creek. I saw our mackinaws when you tried to sneak past Milk junction. They're chuck full of our plews. I want them. Tell me where you have them hidden or I'll jab this knife into Bracha's neck and then I'll stick it into that pig neck of yours. Quick! Where are they?"

Gunsolis stood swaying a little. He was panting. He was very drunk but not too drunk to be weighing all odds.

There was a movement among the breeds in the back of the cabin; a muttering was beginning. River began sweating. Was Gunsolis going to call his bluff? He could jab the knife into Bracha, but after that—

He jerked Pierre Bracha closer. The trader's fat legs were kicking slower and slower; his face was purpling.

River hissed, "Quick, Gunsolis."

River saw a smile com[illegible] the swarthy face as his eyes flickered over River's shoulder. "I teenk M'sieu Silver you have over-played your—" River saw the glance.

River whirled. But a gun butt came crashing down for his skull. A half-breed had sneaked in through the wood-shed.

His lightning whirl was the only thing that saved him.

The rifle stock struck him a glancing blow and Bracha caught the full force of it on a shoulder. The trader was knocked loose from River's grasp, went limp.

River flung Bracha from him. Before the savage could recover from his swing, River was up under the Indian. He plunged the knife into the half-breed's chest.

Screams burst from the other breeds in the room as they saw their man fall. They'd been watching him coming from that back woodshed as River was speaking. He probably had slipped out the cabin's front way at River's entrance.

Now they jerked up rifles, plucked knives from sheaths and rushed. Shots rang out, echoed. River ducked behind the crude bar. Slugs tore into the logs at his back. He jerked his bloody knife from the kicking half-breed just as another leaped the bar.

He jabbed with his knife. Another half-breed came from the other side. River struck with his left fist, and in an instant he was in the center of a screaming frenzied mass.

A knife took him high in the shoulder. A bullet plucked the wet coonskin from his head, shearing hair. Their eagerness to get at him was to their own disadvantage; they got in each other's way.

But River knew it was but a matter of seconds before one of them got him in a vital spot. Already his left arm was growing weak from the knife thrust. A swishing knife pared the fringe of buckskin neatly from his chest. He kicked the man away before he could sneak in another stab, and two men leaped into the vacated place and River knew this was it. He stiffened.

At that moment the kerosene lamp fell to the floor, enveloping the cabin in blackness.

Accident or not, River knew it was a God-send. Swiftly he shifted his position, ducked and lunged low for the uncluttered front door. He left a wild, screaming pack in the spot where he had been, and above the high-pitched jibber of the half-breeds, the guttural shout of Gunsolis came:

"Don't let him get away lak the Red Devil! Get heem!"

Then River was out in the black wet night running down the path.

The gray river appeared ahead through a rift in the trees and he swung to the left for his canoe, running swiftly though silently.

A hand reached out, grabbed him, and jerked him into the wet brush. River's hand was on his knife blade before he hit the ground. He had it out and whirled, back pressed against the wet ground, eyes glaring.

It was the gaunt stranger. In his hand he had a huge black hand-gun—an unusual weapon in this northern trapping country and then River knew for a certainty the man didn't belong to this territory.

"Easy, young un," he drawled. "Hold your knife. You're too danged handy with it."

River glanced at the gun then remembered the heavy dull explosion that had preceded the breaking of the lantern and he understood. "Thanks, mister," he said simply. He thrust the keen blade back into its sheath. "But don't try such grabs in these woods again. Somebody might not hold back like I done."

"I wasn't sure it was you until you were almost up on us. I want to talk to you."

"*Talk,*" River glanced back up the trail. Then he exploded. "Hell of a place an'

time you picked fer talk! We gotta get the hell outta here! Or be cut to ribbons by Gunsolis' renegades! They could ferret us out like rabbits in nothin' flat. C'mon!"

He grabbed the half-hidden boy by the hand and, on the run, led the way to his hidden canoe.

The man rode in the bow; the boy crouched in the center. There was only one paddle. River shoved off, cut deep with the blade and in an instant the slim craft was racing over the black waters down river.

CHAPTER TWO

Hard Luck Haley

THE SOUNDS of voices soon died and the night closed over them. The rain had stopped and everything was dank and silent and black. For this River was grateful.

Finally he spoke to the motionless man in the bow. "Well? What do you want to talk to me about?"

"You're River Silver?"

"I reckon I am." River remembered Gunsolis had called his name aloud back in the cabin.

"Your pappy is Cap Silver?"

"Huh?" River said. He was double puzzled. He nodded his head.

The man gave an audible sigh in the blackness. "Then you're the man I'm lookin' for. You know the river an' done steamboating when you were a younker. I got a steamboat loaded with fur from up above Fort Union, an' no one to pilot her. My last pilot died from a fever two days ago. My name's Haley." He ended with almost an apologetic note.

"Haley!" River stiffened. "You're *Hard Luck* Haley?"

The other winced. "Some call me that."

River recalled the stories he'd heard of this once-fabulously rich trader. He'd started a post at Fort Stevenson, failed. He'd gone in for shipping buffalo robes. He'd tried mining promoting, river-boating. And all along the frontier were the marks of his failures. The last River had heard of Hard Luck Haley, as he'd become known, was last fall. Moose had told him the man had plunged his all in an old steamer, bought up a boatload of provisions and trapping supplies and disappeared up into the wilderness of the headwaters. No one had heard of him since.

River looked at the bony man in the prow. And here was Hard Luck Haley, in his canoe.

The man was talking. "But this time I struck it good. I traded the whole stock I had on the *Mary Ann* with trappers an' Injuns up there. I got her loaded to the gunwhales with prime plew. This spring I knocked the props from under her when the ice went out and come right down the river headed fer St. Louis. I'll make a cleaning if only—" His voice trailed away.

"Only you have no pilot," River said. "And you're tied up down the river. You come up to Pierre Bracha's cabin in hopes of finding someone who knew enough of the river to get you down, is that it?"

"Yeah. One pilot was drowned this spring, the other died of fever. I got my regular crew yet."

River thinned his eyes suddenly. "How'd you know where Pierre Bracha's was? How long you been tied up?"

"Four days. Bracha came to my boat. Curious I guess."

River grunted. A new tone crept into his voice. "Does he know what you got on board?"

The other turned quickly. Haley's eyes stabbed through the darkness questioningly. "You mean—"

"I mean you can trust no one in these parts when it comes to fur! If Pierre Bracha knows you got bales an' bales of prime plew on your craft, I say, mister, you're lucky you're still alive an' your boat's still floatin'."

"I don't know," Haley said slowly, "if he knows or not. He was talking to Boscin and Adams, the engineer, but I cautioned the crew to keep a close watch on their tongues. They're due for a big bonus when we hit St. Louis. I think they've said nothing."

RIVER paddled in silence for a while, thinking. The boy in the center of the canoe had said nothing all the while. River thought it must have been tough on a kid like that, a winter in the north as they'd just experienced. He'd seen the lad wasn't too strongly built, rather on the frail side, with creamy brown skin and wide eyes.

Haley hadn't much sense. Maybe the Hard Luck handle was deserved.

Haley was pleading now. "I'll make it sure worth your while, Silver. When we hit St. Louis it won't be wages—I'll pay you real money."

But River wasn't listening. Thoughts were crowding his brain. What was that Gunsolis had cried out in the blackness as River had plunged for the door? *"Don't let him get away lak the Red Devil!"* Red Devil? Gunsolis must have meant Moose!

River's heart quickened joyously. They must have jumped Moose, tried to kill him, but the wily mountain man had given them the slip. That fear River had seen in Gunsolis' beady eyes was: the half-breed was afraid Moose was with River, waiting outside! Gunsolis feared the mountain man on his trail.

Haley said, "The *Mary Ann's* just around this bend."

River swiftly fashioned a plan as his thoughts seized the obvious points in the set-up. Moose was on the trail of Gunsolis. Gunsolis and Bracha, who quite plainly knew the wealth Haley's steamer had in its hold, would stay near the river craft. What simpler thing could River do than go with Hard Luck Haley as pilot and be right in the midst of the fight when it broke? Gunsolis and Bracha would hound the boat the entire length.

He saw the steamer lights ahead. He suddenly pulled hard on the paddle sending up a white wave at the bow. "I reckon I'll take the job, mister."

"Good. Tomorrow we'll git under way an'—"

"We git under way tonight—at least git up enough steam to get away from that bank an' over-hangin' trees."

"What the idea?"

River's voice went on in cold inflexible tones. "And the men are to be under my command—implicitly."

Haley noted the grimness in the trapper's voice. He half turned. "Do you think there is to be a fight?"

"You can't get away from it now. Gunsolis knows you got fur. Let's hope your crew is faithful. Now do I get complete command?"

Haley glanced at the silent boy, then shrugged wearily. "You can take over," he said simply. He spoke as a man who had thought his fight had been over, but now suddenly realized it was just beginning—and he was afraid.

River grimaced harshly. He didn't like men who were afraid.

IN THE gray dawn the battered, paintless *Mary Ann* ploughed sluggishly through the muddy water of the upper Missouri. She rolled and rode down the moiling current between green, dripping banks and the black smoke from her stacks came down about the pilot house where River stood at the wheel and it was like a page of an old, half-forgotten book for the yellow-haired trapper.

Scores of times had he stood like this with his dad beside him. It brought back other memories, and they hurt. His dad hadn't wanted him to run away; his father had offered him almost anything to stay on with him and learn piloting. And here he was, a penniless, nomad trapper after five years on the fur trail, piloting a wreck of a steamer down the Missouri.

He shook the thoughts from him. The sun struggled through the mist weakly but with no warmth. He watched the banks closely. He didn't want to go down river too quickly.

After a while when the sun's rays touched the pilot house, Haley came up the steps bearing a pot of black coffee and a tin bucket containing hot corn meal. "Here's something to eat. I've arranged for Boscin to come up an' relieve you in the good stretches on the river."

River said nothing, put the tie strap on the wheel and took the food. He had roused out the crew the moment they'd gotten on board last night but he remembered no man by the name of Boscin. The crew had grumbled somewhat, but when Haley told them the situation, their mutterings ceased. All but Adams, the engineer.

"Sounds like a damn'd kid-scare t'me," he had sneered. He was a hulking fellow, black-chested, with surly dark eyes.

River had shrugged and coolly ordered steam to be gotten up. His instinct, however, told him to watch out for Adams.

It had taken them several hours to get up steam; much too long, River thought.

Now on his second cup of scalding coffee he said, "Who's this Boscin?"

"Sort of a ship flunkie. C'n do a bit of

everything. Rainy, the last pilot, taught him piloting some. Mebbe you can give him more pointers an' he can spell you some at the wheel."

River grunted. He said, "Where you got your fur?"

"Down in the main cabins. Under lock an' key." The gaunt trader's eyes gleamed. "Yuh oughta see it, Silver. Bales an' bales of it. I got a hundred thousand dollars worth o'fur on this tub or my name ain't Hard Luck."

River grunted once more and remained silent, and after a while Haley left. He finished eating, slipped the tie-strap off the spokes and eased the *Mary Ann* out of the main channel into slower waters. He didn't want to go too fast. Moose would be coming—and Gunsolis.

His mind went over the men as he'd seen them. For the most part they looked fighters. He'd issue them rifles and powder before sundown and give them a few pointers on how a half-breed fights. His only wish was that they had a more trust-worthy engineer.

His thoughts were moody as they ploughed down the big, lonely river on the crest of the flood. And suddenly he didn't feel too confident. A step sounded on the pilot house stairs behind him. Boscin very probably, he thought, and didn't turn.

"You were hurt last night. Daddy says I should come up and bandage your shoulder." It was a low, crystal-clear voice. River stiffened as if an arrow had taken him between the shoulder blades. *It was the voice of a girl!*

HE TURNED slowly. And then got a second shock.

The girl had smooth, coffee-brown skin and eyes that were brown. It was the skin and eyes of the boy last night!

He looked at the girl in a dress of some red checkered material, with her brown hair piled in a soft roll above her small head, her chin was tilted with an air of independence.

He said gruffly, "My shoulder is all right." Then he thinned his gray-green eyes upon her. "I suppose you think you were fooling me last night?"

She shrugged indifferently, putting the roll of white cloth back in the bag she was carrying. "I said nothing. Dad told me not to even go along, but I had to; dad hasn't much punch when somebody isn't proddin' him."

"I suppose you dreamed this expedition up?" He bent his head toward the steamer.

Her little square nose came up in an additional tilt. "Yes, it was my doings!"

"And the trading?" River sneered.

A slight crimson came into her brown cheeks. "Since when can't a girl do bargaining? I can tell a kit. I can spot a sick beaver hide. I can tell prime from unprime before you can wink. What's wrong with a woman doing those things. If it wasn't for me we wouldn't have those fur now; they'd have traded dad out of his eye teeth." She stopped, set her teeth coldly together; then her voice changed to an impersonal note. "If you are finished eating and don't want your shoulder bandaged, I'll take the pail and leave you."

River reached forward with his mocassined toe. Without a word he slid the corn meal pail over the weathered boards toward her. She picked it up and with a curt flourish of the red checkered dress went down the pilot house steps.

River spat over the side. Hard Luck Haley, he muttered. A guy who'd bring a woman into this wilderness deserves such a handle.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil Lends A Hand

RIVER piloted the steamer grimly for the next few miles, his thoughts curiously angry. He *hadn't* known it was a girl last night. He had told her that just to make her believe she hadn't pulled the wool over his eyes. It irritated him that a slip of a female should outfox him. And be so damned independent about it. About everything! Here he was working, practically, for her, not Haley. Haley didn't have the spine of a coyote. She was the real brains and grit to this crazy, damned scheme of running a steamer up here through the winter. It was so damned crazy that it was almost working—and if it did, it would save the Haley fortune. Just because a girl . . . .

River twisted his thoughts away from her. Hell, what would Moose say—him piloting for a petticoat! Moose had been married once. Even in lonely camps on the

trap line Moose seldom spoke of it, but River knew he hated women.

There was a man—Moose Jons! River gripped the spokes in his lean, tensed fingers and he grimly vowed as soon as he found Moose or cut Gunsolis and his band down, he'd wipe his feet of this outfit. He'd find Moose, and if not—

Suddenly River was aware of a queer silence on the steamer. He leaned over the pilot rail. There were no men on the freight deck. He listened but he heard no voice nor the usual song or curses of roustabouts. All he heard was the puff of the big pipes above his head and they were going slower and slower. They were losing steam! They barely had enough headway for steering!

With a curse River jangled the bell and bent to the brass speaking tube leading to the engine room. He shouted. His words came back to him, empty. Something had happened to the tube. It had been jammed or broken off somewhere.

River glanced at the sun. Mid-morning. Slipping the tie strap on the spokes he walked to the other side of the pilot house to shout down. Steps sounded below.

A moment and a skinny man came up. He walked with a shuffling stoop and his lean face was covered with a sandy, stubbly beard. He grinned crookedly and slid to the wheel.

"I'm Boscin," he said. "Haley tol' me to take a turn here. He wants to see you in the main cabin."

"Where is everybody?" River asked.

Boscin gave that crooked grin again. "Dunno. Mebbe down in the engine room playing cards. They do that a lot."

River cursed. They must have stuffed the speaking tube. He'd see about that when he got through with Haley. He turned over the wheel to the flunkie.

"Keep to the left channel down yonder an' stick to the middle. Watch an' stay clear of shallow ripples; they are sand bars with rock underneath." He went down the pilot steps and turned into the texas toward the main cabin.

He hadn't taken a dozen paces when a step sounded behind him and looking over his shoulder he saw Adams, the engineer, in the sunshine of the companionway. Someone appeared at the other end and in the shadows Rivers saw with amazement the fat form of Pierre Bracha.

"WHAT is this? Where did *you* come from?" He stopped, hand dropping to knife hilt.

A knife appeared in Bracha's right hand. River saw now that Adams had one also. They were closing in on him.

Rivers plucked out his blade. He couldn't understand this. Why knives? Were the guns locked up someplace and they couldn't get their hands on them? Where was the rest of the crew? Haley? The girl? And where in heaven's name had Bracha come from?

Adams was the first to speak, "Kinda surprised, ain't you, trapper." He came down cautiously, thick legs spread wide.

Bracha crept forward from the other way. There was a huge welt on the side of the greasy head where the rifle butt had caught him last night. "We are going to cut your heart out and t'row it to the catfish, Misteer Silver, famous knife-fighter. Eh?"

"How did you get on this boat?" River was watching to make a break and get both men in front of him.

They saw it and blocked the move. Bracha's sneered. "We had everything planned, Meester Adams, Gunsolis and me —then you come. We get you now—ha!"

Then River understood the delay in getting up steam last night. Adams, the engineer, had already betrayed Haley. He'd sent word to Bracha's cabin. Bracha had been smuggled on board. River wondered where Gunsolis fit into the plan, and who else was in the treachery, but he now had little time for thinking. Both men were within five paces of him, standing there warily, figuring on who would make the first move.

River heard a pounding from inside a cabin farther down the texas, and then Haley's muffled voice. The words came indistinct but there was terror and rage in the tone, and River knew Haley was fearful of his daughter's safety.

River fingered his knife, eyes darting. One knife, two assailants. The corridor was narrow. Which one?

Pierre Bracha decided for him. The breed leaped. River met the thrust with a lightning parry. He twisted his blade. Bracha's knife flew in the air. With a lunge River slashed the breed down, then whirled for Adams. Vital stabs missed as both blades

ripped flesh. Then River saw the tough Bracha crawl to his feet, come in from the other side. He kicked Bracha in the throat swiftly.

Pierre's scream died in his mouth. He fell contorted with pain, gasping for breath. River ducked under Adams' second slash. He came up under the big, greasy man and his knife was a wicked live thing in his lean arm. He cut swiftly, surely, and with a gasp, the traitorous engineer of the *Mary Ann* lay writhing on the heavy planking. He had gone down easier than the half-breed.

River came around in the same motion as his arm and it was none too soon. Bracha was on him, screaming. Pierre's knife came hurtling down and River felt a lick of pain shoot up his wounded arm. He stabbed with his blade, but the breed had him caught firmly by the wrist. The breed's right, with the red knife in it, came slashing down—

River grabbed instinctively. He got the other by the arm but not low enough to stay the blow and once more he felt a quiver of pain race through his body.

River had a sensation of the boat striking something, hesitating, then grinding on. There was a harsh sound beneath their feet as if the *Mary Ann* was rubbing on rocks and sand, then there was another lunge of the boat and she stopped. He felt them swing sideways slowly. *Boscin had grounded it!*

He hung to Pierre's brawny arm, powerless to throw it back, just strong enough to restrain that quivering knife from sinking into his neck. They were deadlocked, straining on knees, glaring into each other's eyes. And then River felt the strength creeping from his cut elbow. The knife came down slowly.

There was a crashing sound down the companionway. Hard Luck Haley dropped the wooden cot he'd used as a battering ram. He charged forward. Another shadow appeared at the square of sunlight that came from the freight deck. It was Boscin, the cub pilot. The man had a gun—it was the gun from the pilot house—and he was pointing it at River. But at the sight of the owner of the *Mary Ann* he swung it on Haley, and he screeched,

"Git back there Haley or I'll fill you full of lead!"

THERE was the roar of an explosion—two explosions as one. Boscin went down, the heavy Indian rifle tumbling from his hands. Hard Luck Haley went back against the planking. He fell to his knees, one hand to his chest. Blood came from between his fingers.

There was a cry, "Father! Father!"

River, locked in a death grip with Pierre, felt the start of surprise, the astonishment, shake through the breed. Pierre flicked his eyes upward and in the instant River felt the relaxation in the mountain man's right arm. It was his chance!

With a surge of power he arched his body and twisted, pulling the knife-arm down and to the right of him. Pierre's thick arm flashed down, the knife slithered harmlessly past and River used the momentum to carry his right hand and his knife, still in the grip of the breed, up and into the half-breed's side.

With a choked sob of pain, Pierre relaxed, instinctively.

River jabbed the knife a second time, higher up, and the breed fell back. He was quite dead as he hit the floor.

River staggered to his feet. He stared around, his left arm streaming blood, his breath coming painfully and in ragged sobs. He'd fought for his life scores of times before, but this was the closest he'd ever—

At the end of the companionway stood the girl; and in her strong, rounded arms was a smoking Sharps.

He followed her terrified gaze to Boscin and then he understood. In the split second Boscin had shot, she had pulled the trigger of the Sharps. She had killed a man.

He swung his eyes to Haley. The man was dead, blood moving slowly over his clawed hands that had tried to hold the life in.

River thought: *Hard Luck. It had been a fitting name for him. Right down to the end.*

He turned back to the girl. And suddenly he saw she wasn't the calloused individual with a world of independent aggressiveness after all, but just a slip of a girl who wanted to cry and who was afraid. He said gruffly,

"Come outside."

She whispered. "But—but I've killed him."

"He killed your pappy." He stepped over Pierre Bracha and took the gun from her

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hands. She had been locked in the cabin with her dad, presumably by Adams who had planned this attack to get River out of the way.

At the rail he looked down at her small, shaking figure and for a moment he wanted to drop his hand on her shoulder but he didn't. He put it behind him, and looked at the river.

He muttered a silent curse. Boscin had done a good job. And he'd picked one sweet spot. The *Mary Ann* was stuck fast on a beautiful toothful bar or rocks. And the saloon deck was snugly under two huge cottonwoods—fine ladders for Gunsolis' savages.

The girl's sobs came softly. The river lapped at the stilled paddles of the wheel. A fine mess. A crying girl and—

River spat savagely over the rail and said, "Speak up, girl! Where are the rest of the crew? Are they in on it?"

She stiffened at his gruff voice, and some of the imperiousness of her former self came back into her. "No. I am sure they aren't. Adams was the only one I distrusted, and the crew never liked him either."

"How did you get trapped in the cabin with your dad?"

"We were in there figuring how much fur we had. The door slammed and we were trapped. Dad used a bed for a battering ram and I picked up the rifle."

It was plain to River that Adams had sold out to Gunsolis and Bracha and he'd almost gotten away wih it. They would have succeeded if they had killed him.

River heard a pounding beneath deck. He turned and raced aft. At the engine room door down in the hold he grasped an axe and slashed the stout locking bars down. A gaunt, bald-headed man led the rush out.

There were four men.

"What the hell—" The man stopped at the sight of the frontier man slashed in half score places with blood streaming from his arm. He blurted. "Damn that Adams. Where is he? What's up?"

In terse words River told the crew that had been trapped in the engine room the story of the attempted pirating. When he finished, the bald-headed man grew hard-eyed.

"Haley dead? Guess that makes me captain."

River touched his knife hilt. "I reckon not, mister," he said. "I ain't interested in the furs; they're the gal's. What I'm interested in is a little boarding party we'll have among us tonight on these over-hanging cottonwoods if we don't git this damn'd tub off the bar and back into the big channel."

"You're in with some others!" Baldy shot at him.

River looked the man in the eye. The other's gaze dropped. River swung his eyes over all of them. "Now git out the yawl and see if you can't pull 'er off." He said it quietly.

FROM the bow rail he watched them tug and he knew it was useless. He went up to the main deck, entered the big cabins and looked at the fur. His eyes gleamed as he saw the wealth in lustrous packs before him, but it was the gleam of a mountain man who saw hard work in those bales of prime plews, the beauty of fine skins. It was not the gleam of avarice.

He saw shifting the furs would do little to help the stricken boat; their weight was inconsequential. He went down and looked at the wood bins. They were almost empty. The boat already was stripped down, riding as high as she could.

He went up and waved Baldy and his crew in. "Get up steam," he ordered curtly. "The river is rising every hour. We might plough down that channel."

Baldy swung a jaundiced eye to the narrow, roaring channel that had boulders like a grizzly's teeth. "An' tear out her bottom?"

River shrugged. "Better'n dying like rats in a trap."

"What makes you think somebody's going to attack us?" Baldy glanced at the girl who had come up, brown eyes wide. Her eyes fixed on River, questioningly.

River shrugged once more and turned away from them. "I joined Haley because I wanted to have men to sneak up on Gunsolis' camp an' have a look-see at their packs. I lost my partner. Now I'm in a fix where Gunsolis c'n sneak up on me. An' when he does his red devils will kill the lot of you. Now git some steam up!"

He walked away from the girl and the men. He was stuck to this cursed boat now.

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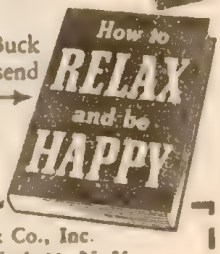

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They were a bunch of helpless rivermen.

He turned as he heard a voice behind him, "You don't have to stay with us, Mr. Silver."

It was the girl. She had her chin up. She went on, "We are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves. In fact, I would just as soon have you leave."

River stared. The tears were gone. The trembling of lips. And here she was, telling him to scoot off and save his own hide!

"I reckon, Miss," he drawled, a slight touch of amused scorn in his voice. "Your crew could take care of itself, but I'll hang around anyhow." He turned and walked away and he could hear her stamp her foot on the deck as if in anger. For the first time in two weeks, River Silver chuckled. "The little calf has sand awright."

With the yawl and the skiff they got driftwood and worked up steam. The shadows were long on the river when the buckskin-clothed pilot gave the signal: "Full speed ahead." The river he noted, had risen some inches even since noon.

The battered *Mary Ann* trembled and shook as the big wheel thrashed the shallow waters in the backwash over the bar. She wouldn't move. River bent to the tube. "Throw 'er backward." They'd fixed the tube.

Baldy's muffled curse came up to him. "You'll rip the belly outta her. I c'n hear rocks grindin' under her."

"Do as I say!" River shouted back and swore. He looked at the encroaching cottonwoods. Some even overhung the saloon deck. He looked at the firm footing of the sand bar half a stone's throw from the ragged hempen bumpers. What a swell spot for an attack by Gunsolis' devils.

A step behind him and he turned to see the girl. She had food in a pail. It was steaming. She said, "Here, eat. If what you say is true, you'll need it before another morning."

He said, "Put it down on the bench. I'll eat later when we get this boat shootin' down that channel."

She looked at the channel, then back at him. "You'd better eat." She walked away, then stopped. "I'll be back. Maybe, now, you will let me bandage your arm." She went down the pilot steps.

River bit his lip hard. She knew what

they were in for. He cursed the trembling *Mary Ann*. The boat wouldn't move. He swung the pilot wheel this way and that. It had no effect. They put on more steam, tried to go ahead, and suddenly the thrashing wheel stopped dead. Baldy's curse came up the tube.

"Busted a driving arm."

River took a resigned breath. "Come up. Get your guns."

The girl came up with bandages and wrapped his arm. He liked the scent of her heavy black hair.

His eyes averted hers as he said, "They won't attack until dawn. You be in your cabin. Have the door locked. If we don't win, use that Sharps."

She nodded, "I understand." Her fingers stayed for just an instant on his bare shoulder. Had he imagined that? It set up a curious hot pounding in the center of his chest. He'd never experienced anything like it before. It was pleasant and yet strange, and almost fearful, he wanted to pull her to him, but in the next moment she was walking from him.

He watched her lithe, rounded figure disappear down the pilot stair. The feeling grew subdued but didn't leave him. He took it close to him and watched the red sun grow to ashes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Davey Jones Returns A Trapper

THE blackness was like something you could touch. There were no stars, no moon, only blackness.

River crouched behind a row of empty barrels he'd found on the freight deck and which he'd ordered the crew to place around at the rail for protection from arrows. He'd just made a tour of the boat. Two of the men had been asleep. Baldy had growled, "This is crazy, Silver." River told him to watch that spit of sand. He, himself, guarded from the encroaching bank on the other side. All night long the water had raced underneath, rising, but the boat was yet stuck fast. A streak of gray light was breaking through now. River peered at the bank, caught his breath. All around him

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on the freight deck were guns. Each man had half a dozen. They'd been locked in Haley's cabin which was why Morgan and Pierre had but knives to attack River. But the *Mary Ann* was short on powder.

River peered again, then stiffened at what he saw. He cried out loudly in the night to his men: "They're here! Watch out!" He aimed a heavy Sharps and squeezed the trigger on something moving up a huge cottonwood that leaned over the boat.

The boom of the big rifle awakened echoes. And suddenly the forest was alive with war whoops and the screams of brigand half-breeds. The rattle of rifle-fire swept around the *Mary Ann*. Running figures dropped, more came on. Arrows hissed in the darkness.

Some of the attackers had dropped onto the boat. There began hand-to-hand fighting toward the bow. The night was alive with terrible cries as men died with knives and bullets in their hearts and River, still pumping lead at the horde trying to rush his side of the boat, was glad that the girl was in her cabin, safe temporarily. The thought of her, even now, moved him oddly.

He had counted his shots. At the sixth one he dropped the last spent rifle and reached for his knife. Now let the devils come. He had no time to reload but he'd give one or two a belly full of steel before—

Someone thrust a rifle into his hand. "Here," a voice said beside him, coolly, with even tones. "It is loaded."

He spun around. In the blackness she crouched beside him. She was priming the empty rifles with sure, swift hands!

"My God—" The sight of savages bursting from the woods pulled him back. He sent bullet after bullet crashing into the blackness and his heart grew a curious mixture of pride and warmth and fear. He choked out. "You shouldn't have come."

"It's better this way," she said.

"Keep one bullet for yourself," he said. "If Gunsolis can keep them rushing we're done for. They're on the aft deck now." He swung his aim down the boat and blazed at a running figure. The figure dropped.

River blazed again. Another toppled over the rail. The shrill war whoops broke in quavers. River knew what it meant. He raised his bull-like voice. "Give 'em hell,

men! We got 'em on the run!" River bellowed his words again and again, shooting with redoubled swiftness.

From the bow a hoarse bellow sounded. "Fight heem! We got heem won! Only three-four left now! Fight!"

IT WAS the voice of the half-breed leader, Gunsolis. And with a curse River leaped from his knees and leveled a rifle at the running brigand's thick body. The hammer clicked on an empty magazine, and then River was hearing the girl's sobbing voice for the first time: "That is all. We are out of powder! Father hid the rest somewhere and I couldn't find it."

River sprang to his feet. His hand plucked out the Green River blade from its belly sheath. He went forward in a crouching run. If he could take Gunsolis down—

The half-breed saw him before he was halfway across the freight deck. Gunsolis swung a rifle toward River. River sprang sideways. The explosion lighted the black, greasy face behind the gun. River felt the bullet sear his cheek—a hot, slashing thing of death. Then the mountain man sprang.

Gunsolis clubbed his rifle. River took the blow on up-raised, shunting arm. Straight-on, the blow would have broken River's arm like a match-stick but the mountain man had fought with rifle clubbers before. He closed in.

Gunsolis dropped the rifle, kicked a protecting knee upward and in the graying light River saw a flash as a knife miraculously appeared in the breed's right hand. River thought, *a knife-man also,* and stabbed.

Gunsolis twisted from the blow, stabbed. But River's iron shoulder crashed into his stomach. The blow went wide, barely—River felt his buckskin laid open from shoulder to hip—then he felt both of them in the air, falling. His butting tackle and knocked them both over the rail!

The cold water was a shock. They plunged beneath the surface, rolling over and over as the Missouri swept them into the deep channel. And each man fought to free his knife hand from the other's grip and plunge his blade into the other's vitals. The breed's talon-like fingers bit into River's clutched knife-arm. River strained to hold the other's thick, jabbing arm from striking his body. The icy chill of the water

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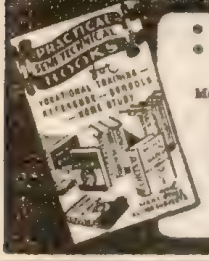

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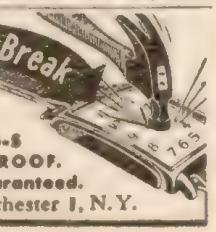

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began to grip at his throat. He knew it was from lack of air. He knew they had to break loose and surface or both would be drowned, locked in a death-grip. River kicked his powerful legs to surface, fighting his jaws to keep them closed.

Then River had a free arm. Desperately he lashed out for where the breed's head should be and had the thrill of feeling his knuckles strike bone. He felt the grip at his throat slip. He jerked back, kicked with both legs. He was free! He needed air. He fought for the surface once more.

And then an arm closed in on him, *from behind!* Another wrapped around his buckskin body. They became fast, rigid as iron, and River knew he was in the death grip of a drowning man.

Gunsolis, in the grip of terrible involuntary struggles, had fastened upon him and the half-breed was dragging him down to his death in the strangling, cold waters of the Missouri!

River reached over his head, closed his fingers in Gunsolis' greasy hair. He gripped, jerked with all the strength in his weakened arm and at the same time flung his own head back. His head smashed full into the breed's unprotected face. River felt an involuntary loosening of Gunsolis' arms. He jerked and smashed again. The arms fell away. The body of Gunsolis drifted away, arms lifeless. River kicked against the current and surfaced.

FOR long moments after he broke water, all he could do was drift with the current, breathing deeply. When he'd recovered he caught an over-hanging branch and pulled himself slowly to shore. Another long moment of exhaustion. Finally he fought to his feet and slashed through the brush along the shore up the river. The dawn had come, a misty gray-black.

As he rounded a bend, he saw the boat. For infinite seconds he searched the crumpled figures with his throbbing eyes for sign or sight of the girl's body. He couldn't see it. He fought his way over rocks and through mud toward the sand bar, running, falling.

He grasped the hempen bumper and drew himself on board, and stood there amidst the carnage, feet apart, panting heavily, with the dull voiceless pain of an

animal in his heart. She was not to be found—she was gone.

His blood-shot eyes picked up movement. His fighting-clogged heart tried to rouse from its lethargy for an Indian was clambering over the bow rail from the river. River's weary hand went to his belly sheath. It was empty. He swayed, preparing to rush—

"Hullo!" It was as the voice of someone he knew.

Water dripped from buckskin fringes in tiny thuds as River froze, then with a whoop the pilot of the *Mary Ann* sprang across the blood-clotted deck, arms out-stretched and he was shouting.

"Moose! How in—"

They gripped. Horny hands clasped hard. Eyes were bright with a hard, fierce, tearless joy. The two partners faced each other, inches apart. The great, gaunt Moose had a score of face wounds.

"Gunsolis an' his band jumped me at Bear Creek. I fought 'em off long enough to git to the river then I jumped. I been goin' through hell followin' 'em tuh git our fur back. I was camped up-river next to them last night tryin' tuh figure a plan when I heerd gun-fire, an' here I am." He looked around and whistled. Then a note of disgust crept into his rumbling voice. "Shucks, looks like I missed it."

"Looks like you just got here in time to help clean up," a cool voice said at River's elbow and River spun as if a rifle bullet had taken him in the shoulder. She stood there. And behind her, in the companionway, stood Baldy, the black-bearded smithie and a deck hand. They were covered with blood.

"Where did you come from?" River managed.

"We were looking for more powder. The Indians ran when you battered Gunsolis over the rail. We were afraid they'd come back. We—I was afraid when you went over with Gunsolis—" Her eyes dropped suddenly.

River's chest swelled. The slashed, buckskin fringes on his shirt quivered. But when he spoke his voice was flat and without emotion.

"No, they won't come back. Once an Indian is defeated, he runs—especially after he's lost his leader." He fought to keep his

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voice expressionless. "Your furs are safe, Miss Haley."

"*My* furs?" Her dark eyes lifted to him. She shook her head slightly with a faint smile.

"No, they aren't mine anymore. They belong to all of us, Baldy, here, Smith, you. After what we went through you all earned a full share in them."

River swallowed. "Shucks, Miss—"

"And this is the partner you have been looking for?" She turned to the giant, red-bearded Moose who was scratching his tousled head in puzzlement. It was all too much for him.

River grinned. "That's him. Ain't he beautiful?"

"He is," she said. "Would he like to continue down-river with us? We need a good man now that Smith and Baldy are the only ones left."

River turned and looked at the girl. *We need a good man.* The choked warm feeling left his chest; anger began to swell forth. That old imperiousness again. Taking things for granted.

Then she looked up at him. "Or, Mister Pilot, isn't that the way you want it?"

There was a look in her eyes no man could mistake. River's anger fled like the snow before a chinook. He looked to Moose and grinned. "I reckon."

"What th—" Moose's great jaw fell. He saw the look in River's eyes and turned away, not saying what was in his mind but growling something about an insult in calling him beautiful.

River spoke curtly to the men, his eyes not leaving the girl.

"Baldy, get busy and fix that wheel arm. Smith, you start knocking those barrels to pieces to get up steam. The river has risen enough to get off this bar and we got five mackinaws of fur that Moose has got spotted to pick up. Then we're ridin' down to St. Louis, share an' share alike."

She smiled at the way he took command. His arm went around her. Dawn was coming to the Missouri. A turtle dove had awakened in the cottonwoods on the bank. Its soft crying heralded a new day. River lifted his head.

Five long years on the fur trail—it was worth it.

THE END

(Continued from page 77)

self before the fire. He seemed intent on warming his hands but his face still was thoughtful.

Suddenly the door burst open and Canton, a gun in each hand, boomed in his customary arrogant voice:

"Teton, you're under arrest for robbing the United States mails!"

"Sheriff," he said, "you don't scare me worth a damn. You and your guns wouldn't have kept me from shootin' it out with you. But for the past five minutes I've been studyin' the end of that rifle stuck through the crack in the wall and I don't know who in hell is behind it."

Outlaws other than Teton had reason to be dubious of Frank Canton and his methods. He was one of the earliest sheriffs of Johnson County. He was the man who broke up the Dalton gang in Oklahoma and his fame took him to other states after he resigned as a peace officer in Wyoming.

In the West of those days, if a man had a homicidal predilection, it wasn't such a bad idea to get sworn in as a peace officer. The law backed a man up and excused any nervousness he might experience with his trigger finger. A number of the most deadly, cold-blooded men in western history wore official emblems on their chests.

Psychologists state that a person who most violently condemns evil in another has a repressed subconscious urge to commit the crime himself and the more intollerant he is of others' sins, the greater is his unconscious craving that has been suppressed. If an outlet can be found along lawful or moral lines to release the urge, the victim finds satisfaction and relief.

Frank Canton apparently found ample opportunity for providing outlet for any unconscious urges he may have had. Legends have grown up in the West around the exploits of this cold-blooded and ambitious official. Badmen were not the only ones who would have liked to have seen him buried in Boot Hill. To emphasize his peaceful intent and other virtues, Canton was moved to write an autobiography shortly before his death. In it, he frankly admits that the West never would have been tamed without his aid.

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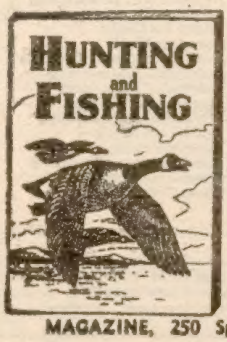

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